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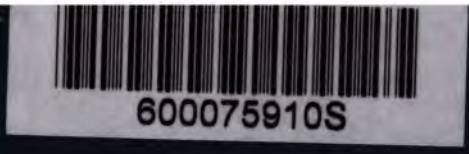
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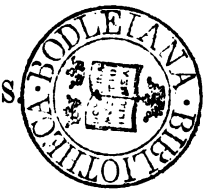
MONSIEUR MAURICE.

VOL. III.

MONSIEUR MAURICE,

A NEW NOVELETTE;

AND OTHER TALES.



BY

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"BARBARA'S HISTORY," "DEBENHAM'S VOW,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1873.

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249. g. 422.

THE TRAGEDY IN

THE PALAZZO BARDELLO.

[The scene of this story is laid in the Rome of fifteen years ago, when the old Pontifical régime was yet in full force, and Victor Emanuel was still King of Sardinia.]

THE TRAGEDY IN

THE PALAZZO BARDELLO.

CHAPTER I.

THE sun had been up for the best part of an hour; the golden haze in the East was slowly melting away; the sluggish tide of bullock trucks had fairly set in along the Via Sacra; and a faint, universal stir of awakening life was to be felt rather than heard in the pleasant morning air, when a certain Englishman, Hugh Girdlestone by name, rose from his lounging attitude against the parapet of the Tower of the Capitol, and

prepared to be gone. He had been standing there in the same spot, in the same attitude, since the first grey of the dawn. He had seen the last star fade from the sky. He had seen the shadowy Sabine peaks uplift themselves one by one, and the Campagna emerge, like a troubled sea, from the mystery of the twilight.

Rome with its multitudinous domes and bell-towers, its history, its poetry, its fable, lay at his feet—yonder the Coliseum, brown, vast, indistinct against the light, with the blue day piercing its topmost arches; to the left the shapeless ruins of the Palace of the Cæsars; to the right, faintly visible above the mist, the pyramid of Caius Cestius, beside which, amid a wilderness of sweet wild violets, lie the ashes of John Keats; nearer still, the sullen Tiber eddying over the fast vanishing piers of the Pons Emilius; nearest of all, the Forum, with its excavations, its columns, its triumphal arches, its scanty turf, its stunted

acacias, its indescribable air of repose and desolation; and beyond and around all, the brown and broken Campagna, bounded on the one hand by long chains of snow-streaked Apennines, and on the other by a shining zone of sea. A marvellous panorama! Perhaps, taking it for all in all, the most marvellous panorama that Europe has to show. Hugh Girdlestone knew every feature of it by heart. He was familiar with every crumbling tower and modern campanile, with every space of open piazza, with every green enclosure, with the site of every famous ruin and the outline of every famous hill. It was his favourite haunt — the one pageant of which his eyes and his imagination were never weary. He had seen the sun rise and set upon that scene many and many a time, both now and in years past. He might, in all probability, stand in the same spot and witness the same gorgeous spectacle to-morrow; and yet he lingered

there as fondly as if this visit were his first, and left as reluctantly as if it were destined to be his last.

Slowly and thoughtfully he went his way, out through the spacious court-yard, past the bronze horse and his imperial rider, down the great steps, and along the Via Ara Cœli. Passing the church of the Jesuits, he paused for a moment to listen to the chanting. As he did so, a Campagna drover in a rough sheepskin jacket stopped his truck to kneel for a moment on the lowest step and then trudge on again; and presently an Albano woman lifted the ponderous leather curtain and came out, bringing with her a momentary rush of rolling harmonies. The Englishman listened and lingered, made as if he would go in, and then, with something of a smile upon his lip, turned hastily away. Going straight on, with his head a little thrown forward and his hat pulled somewhat low upon his brow, he then pushed on

at a swift, swinging stride, proceeding direct to the post-office, and passing the Pantheon without so much as a glance.

Manly, well-born, well-educated, gifted with a more than ordinary amount of brains, and, perhaps, with a more than ordinary share of insular stubbornness, Hugh Girdlestone was just one of those men whom it does one good to meet in the streets of a continental city. He was an Englishman through and through; and he was precisely that type of Englishman who commands the respect, though seldom the liking, of foreigners. He expressed and held to his opinons with a decision that they disliked intensely. His voice had a ring of authority that grated upon their ears. His very walk had in it something characteristic and resolute that offended their prejudices. For his appearance, it was as insular as his gait or his accent. He was tall, strongly made, somewhat gaunt and swift-

looking about the limbs, with a slight stoop in the shoulders, and a trick of swinging his gloves in his right hand as he went along. In complexion and feature he was not unlike the earlier portraits of Charles II. The lines of his face were less harsh, and his skin was less swarthy; but there was the same sarcastic play of lip, and now and then a flash of the same restless fire in the eye.

Nor did the resemblance end here. It came out strongest of all in a mere passing shadow of expression—that expression of saturnine foreboding which Walpole aptly defined as the "fatality of air" common to the line of the Stuarts. The look was one which came to his face but rarely—so rarely that many of his intimate acquaintances had never seen it there; but it started to the surface sometimes, like a hidden writing, and sometimes settled like a darkness on his brow.

The main facts of his story up to the

morning of this day—this 13th day of February, 1857—may be told in a few lines.

He was the son of a wealthy Derbyshire squire, had taken honours at Cambridge, and had been called to the bar some four or five years back. As yet he could scarcely be said to have entered actively upon his professional life. He had written an able treatise on the law of International Copyright, and edited an important digest of Chancery practice. He had also been for years in the habit of contributing to the best periodical literature of the day. Within the last four months, after a prolonged opposition on the part of her nearest relatives, he had happily married a young lady of ancient Roman Catholic family and moderate fortune, to whom he had been attached from boyhood. They were spending a long honeymoon in Rome, and were perfectly happy as a pair of lovers in a fairy tale. When it is added that she was just twenty-two and

he thirty-four years of age, the outline of their little history is made out with sufficient clearness for all the purposes of this narrative.

Pushing on, then, at his eager pace, Hugh Girdlestone came presently to the post-office and inquired for his letters. There was but one—a square, blue-looking, ill-favoured sort of document, sealed with a big office seal and addressed in a trim business hand. He had to show his passport before the clerk would trust it beyond the bars of the little cage in which he sat, and then it was overweight, and he was called upon to pay forty-six bajocchi for extra postage. This done—and it seemed to him that the clerk was wilfully and maliciously slow about it—Hugh Girdlestone crushed the letter into an inner breast-pocket, and turned away. At the door he hesitated, looked at his watch, crossed over, withdrew into the shade of a neighbouring *porte-cochère*, took his letter out again, and tore it open.

It contained two enclosures; the one a note from his publishers, the other a letter of credit upon a great Roman banking-house. He drew a deep breath of satisfaction. He had been expecting this remittance for several days past, not altogether with anxiety, for he was in no immediate need of money, but with some degree of impatience; for the fate of more than one project was involved in the sum which this letter of credit might chance to represent. The extension of their tour as far as Naples, the purchase of certain bronzes and cameos, and the date of their return to England, were all dependent upon it. It was no wonder, then, that Hugh Girdlestone's brow cleared at sight of the amount for which he found himself entitled to draw upon the princely establishment in the Piazza Venezia. It exceeded his expectations by nearly one-half, and made him a rich man for the next three months.

Having read the letter and folded the

enclosure carefully away in his pocket-book, he then struck off in a north-easterly direction towards some of those narrow thoroughfares that lie between the Tiber, the Corso, and the Piazza di Spagna.

The streets were now beginning to be alive with passengers. The shop-keepers were busy arranging their windows; the vetturini were ranging themselves in their accustomed ranks; the beggars were lazily setting about their professional avocations for the day; and the French regiments were turning out, as usual, for morning parade on the Pincio. Here and there a long-haired student might be seen with his colour-box under his arm, trudging away to his work of reproduction in some neighbouring gallery; or a Guarda Nobile, *cigarette en bouche*, riding leisurely towards the Vatican. Here and there, too, on the steps of the churches and at the corners of the streets, were gathered little knots of priests and mendicant friars, deep in pious

gossip, and redolent less of sanctity than of garlic.

But to Hugh Girdlestone these sights and sounds were all too familiar to claim even passing attention. He went on his way, preoccupied and unobservant, with a face of happy thoughtfulness and a head full of joyous hopes and projects, Life had, perhaps, never seemed so bright for him as at that moment. The happy present was his own, and the future with all its possible rewards and blessings lay, as it were, unfolded before him. It was not often that he was visited by a holiday mood such as this; and, English as he was, he could scarcely forbear smiling to himself as he went along. Coming presently, however, into a long picturesque street lined with shops on both sides from end to end, he slackened his pace, shook off his reverie, and began loitering before the windows with the air of a purchaser.

Pausing now at a cameo-cutter's, now

at a mosaicist's, now at a jeweller's, hesitating between the bronze medals in this window and the antique gems in that, he came presently to one of those shops for the sale of devotional articles, one or more of which are to be found in almost every street of Rome. Here were exquisitely carved rosaries in cedar and coral and precious stones, votive offerings in silver and wax, consecrated palms, coloured prints of saints and martyrs in emblematic frames, missals, crosses, holy water vessels, and wreaths of immortelles. Here also, occupying the centre of the window and relieved against a stand of crimson cloth, stood an ivory crucifixion designed after the famous Vandyck at Antwerp, and measuring about ten inches in height. It was a little gem in its way—a tiny masterpiece of rare and delicate workmanship.

Hugh Girdlestone had seen and admired it many a time before, but never

till now with any thought of purchase. To-day, however, the aspect of affairs was changed. His letter of credit troubled his peace of mind and oppressed him with an uneasy sense of wealth. He longed to buy something for his little bride at home, and he knew that he could find nothing in all Rome which she would prefer to this. She would appreciate it as a piece of art, and prize it as a most precious adjunct to her devotions. She would love it, too, for his dear sake, and her eyes would rest upon it when she prayed for him in her orisons. Dear, pious, tender little heart! it should be hers, cost what it might. He would take it home to her this very morning. What pleasure to see the glad wonder in her eyes! What pleasure to give her back smile for smile, and kiss for kiss, when she should fly into his arms to thank him for the gift!

So Hugh Girdlestone went in and bought it, reckless of the breach it made

in his purse, and caring for nothing but the delight of gratifying what he so dearly loved.

That he, an ultra-liberal thinker in all matters religious and political, should select such a gift for his wife, was just one of those characteristic traits that essentially marked the man. Setting but slight value on all forms of creeds, and ranking that of the Romanist at a lower level than most, he could yet feel a sort of indulgent admiration for the graceful side of Roman Catholic worship. The flowers, the music, the sculpture, the paintings, the perfumes, the gorgeous costumes, gratified his sense of beauty; and, regarding these things from a purely æsthetic point of view, he was willing to admit that it was a pretty, poetical sort of religion enough—for a woman.

Carrying the ivory carving carefully packed in a little oblong box under his arm, Hugh Girdlestone then hastened homewards with his purchase. It was

now ten o'clock, and all Rome was as full of stir and life as at mid-day. His way lay through the Piazza di Spagna, up the great steps, and on through the Via Sistina, to a certain by-street near the Quattro Fontane, where he and his little wife occupied an upper floor in a small palazzo situated upon one of the loftiest and healthiest points of the Quirinal Hill. As he neared the spot, a sense of pleasurable excitement came upon him. He smiled, unconsciously to himself, and, scarcely knowing that he did so, quickened his pace at every step. To the accustomed beggar at the corner he flung a double dole in the joyousness of his heart; to a lean dog prowling round the *cortile*, a biscuit that chanced to be in his pocket. Happiness disposes some people to benevolence, and Hugh Girdlestone was one of that number.

Up he went—up the broad stone staircase which served as a general thoroughfare to the dwellers in the Palazzo

Bardello; past the first landing, with its English footman, insolently discontent, lolling against the half-opened door; past the second landing, fragrant with flowers, the temporary home of a wealthy American family; past the third, where, in an atmosphere of stormy solfeggi, lived an Italian tenor and his wife; and on, two steps at a time, to the fourth, where all that he loved best in life awaited his coming! There he paused. His own visiting card was nailed upon the door, and under his name, in a delicate female hand, was written that of his wife. Happy Hugh Girdlestone! There was not a lighter heart in Rome at that moment when, having delayed an instant to take breath before going in, he pulled out his latch-key, opened the gates of his paradise, and passed into the shady little vestibule beyond.

At the door of the salon he was met by Margherita, their Roman servant—a glorious creature who looked as if she

might have been the mother of the Gracchi, but who was married, instead, to an honest water-carrier down by the Ripetta, and was thankful to go out to service for some months every year.

"Hush!" she whispered, with her finger on her lip. "She sleeps still."

The breakfast lay on the table, untouched and ready; the morning sunshine flamed in at the windows; the flowers on the balcony filled the air of the room with a voluptuous perfume. It was a day of days—a day when to be still in bed seemed almost like a sacrilege—a day when, above all others, one should be up, and doing, and revelling in the spring-time of the glad new year.

Hugh Girdlestone could scarcely believe that Margherita was in earnest.

"Sleeps!" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that the Signora has not yet rung her bell."

"But is she still in bed?"

"Still in bed, Signore, and sleeping soundly. I stole in about half-an-hour ago, and she never heard me. I would not wake her. Sleep is a blessed thing —the good God sends it."

The Englishman laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"One may have too much, even of a blessing, my good Margherita," he said. "*I* shall wake her, at all events, and she will thank me for doing so. See—I have something here worth the opening of one's eyes to look upon!"

Margherita clasped her hands in an ecstasy of devotional admiration.

"*Cielo!*" she exclaimed. "How beauful!"

He placed the carving on a stand of red cloth, and then, going over to the balcony, gathered a handful of orange-blossoms and crimson azalias.

"We must decorate our altar with flowers, Margherita," he said, smiling.

"Fetch me those two white vases from the chimney-piece in the ante-room."

The vases were brought, and he arranged his bouquets as tenderly and gracefully as a woman might have arranged them. This done, he stole to the bedroom door, opened it noiselessly, and peeped in.

All within was wrapt in a delicious, dreamy dusk. The jalousies were closed and the inner blinds drawn down; but one window stood a few inches open, admitting a soft breath of morning air, and now and then a faint echo from the the world beyond. He advanced very cautiously. He held his breath—he stole on a step at a time—he would not have roused her for the world till all was ready. At the dressing-table he paused and looked round. He could just see the dim outline of her form in the bed. He could just see how one little hand rested on the coverlet, and how her hair lay like a lustrous cloud upon the pillow. Very

carefully he then removed her dressing-case and desk from a tiny table close by, carried it to the side of the bed, and placed it where her eyes must first meet it on waking. He next crept back to the salon for the ivory carving; then for the flowers; and then arranged them on the table like the decorations of a miniature shrine.

And all this time she neither woke nor stirred.

At last, his pretty little preparations being all complete, the young husband, careful even now not to startle her too rudely, gently unclosed the jalousies, drew aside the blinds, and filled the room with sunshine.

"Ethel," he said. "Ethel, do you know how late it is?"

But Ethel still slept on.

He moved a step nearer. Her face was turned to the pillow; but he could see the rounded outline of her cheek, and it struck him that she looked strangely

pale. His heart gave a great throb; his breath came short; a nameless terror—a terror of he knew not what—fell suddenly upon him.

"Ethel!" he repeated. "My darling—my darling!"

He sprang to the bedside—he hung over her—he touched her hand, her cheek, her neck—then uttered one wild, despairing cry, and staggered back against the wall.

She was dead.

Not fainting. No; not even in the first horror of that moment did he deceive himself with so vain a hope. She was dead, and he knew that she was dead. He knew it with as full and fixed a sense of conviction as if he had been prepared for it by months of anxiety. He did not ask himself why it was so. He did not ask himself by what swift and cruel disease—by what mysterious accident, this dread thing had come to pass. He only knew that she was dead; and

that all the joy, the hope, the glory of life was gone from him for ever.

A long time, or what seemed like a long time, went by thus; he leaning up against the wall, voiceless, tearless, paralysed, unable to think, or move, or do anything but stare in a blank, lost way at the bed on which lay the wreck of his happiness.

By-and-by—it might have been half an hour or an hour later—he became dimly conscious of a sound of lamentation; of the presence of many persons in the room; of being led away like a child, and placed in a chair beside an open window; and of Margherita kneeling at his feet and covering his hands with tears. Then, as one who has been stunned by some murderous blow, he recovered by degrees from his stupor.

"Salimbeni," he said, hoarsely.

It was the first word he had spoken.

"We have sent for him, Signore," sobbed Margherita. "But—but—"

He lifted his hand, and turned his face aside.

"Hush!" he replied. "I know it."

Signor Salimbeni was a famous Florentine surgeon who lived close by in the Piazza Barberini, and with whom Hugh Girdlestone had been on terms of intimacy for the last four or five months. Almost as his name was being uttered, he arrived; —a tall, dark, bright-eyed man of about forty years of age, with something of a military bearing. His first step was to clear the place of intruders—of the English family from the first floor, of the Americans from the second, of the Italian tenor and his wife, and of the servants who had crowded up *en masse* from every part of the house. He expelled them all, civilly but firmly; locked the door behind the last; and went alone into the chamber of death. Hugh Girdlestone followed him, dull-eyed, tongue-tied, bewildered, like a man half roused from sleep.

The surgeon bent silently over the

corpse; turned the poor white face to the light; held a mirror to the lips; touched the passive hand; lifted first one eyelid, then the other; and felt for the last lingering spark of vital heat on the crown of the head. Then he shook his head.

"It is quite hopeless, my friend," he said gently. "Life has been extinct for some two hours or more."

"But the cause?"

Signor Salembeni slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"Impossible to tell," he replied, "without a proper examination."

The widower buried his face in his hands and groaned aloud.

"Whether the seat of this mischief be in the brain," continued Signor Salimbeni, "or whether, as I am more inclined to suspect, it should be sought in the heart . . ."

He broke off abruptly—so abruptly, and with such a change of voice, that

Hugh Girdlestone was startled from his apathy. He looked up, and saw the surgeon staring down with a face of ashy horror at the corpse upon the bed.

"*Dio!*" he faltered. "What is this?"

He had laid back the collar of the night-dress and bared the beautiful white bosom beneath; and there, just above the region of the heart, like a mere speck upon a surface of pure marble, was visible a tiny puncture—a spot so small, so insignificant, that but for a pale violet discoloration spreading round it like a halo, it would perhaps have escaped observation altogether.

"What is this?" he repeated. "What does it mean?"

Hugh Girdlestone answered never a word, but stood in stony silence with his eyes fixed on the fatal spot. Then he stooped, looked into it more narrowly, shuddered, rose once again to his full height, and less with his breath than by

the motion of his lips, shaped out the one word :—

"*Murdered.*"

CHAPTER II.

IT was the most mysterious crime that had been committed in Rome since the famous murder in the Coliseum about seven years before. The whole city rang with it. Even the wretched little local newspapers, the *Giornale di Roma*, the *Diario Romano*, and the *Vero Amico del Popolo*, made space, amid the more pressing claims of Church festivals, provincial miracles, and the reporting of homilies, to detail some few scanty particulars of the "*tragedia deplorabile*" in the Palazzo Bardello. Each, too, hinted its own solution to the enigma. The *Diario* inclined to the suicidal point of view;

the *Giornale*, more politically wise than its contemporaries, pointed a significant finger towards Sardinia; the *Vero Amico*, under cover of a cloud of fine phrases, insinuated a suspicion of Hugh Girdlestone himself. At every table-d'hôte and every artist's club, at the public reading rooms, in the studios, in the cafés, and at every evening party throughout Rome, it was the universal topic.

In the meanwhile such feeble efforts as it is in the nature of a Pontifical Government to make were put forward for the discovery of the murderer. A post-mortem examination was appointed; official consultations were held; official depositions were drawn up; pompous gendarmes clanked perpetually up and down the staircase and courtyard of the Palazzo Bardello; and every one about the place who could possibly be supposed to have anything to say upon the subject was summoned to give evidence. But in vain. Days went by, weeks went by, and the

mystery remained impenetrable as ever. Passing shadows of suspicion fell here and there—on Margherita, on a Corsican courier in the service of the American family, on Hugh Girdlestone; but they rested scarcely at all, and vanished away as a breath from a surface of polished steel.

In the meanwhile, Ethel Girdlestone was laid to rest in a quiet little Roman Catholic cemetery beyond the walls—a lonely, picturesque spot, overlooking the valley of the Tiber and the mountains about Fidenæ. A plain marble cross and a wreath of immortelles marked the place of her grave. For a week or two the freshly-turned mould looked drear and desolate under the Spring sunshine; but the grass soon sprang up again, and the wild crocuses struck root and blossomed over it; and by that time Rome had found some fresh subject for gossip, and the fate of Ethel Girdlestone was well nigh forgotten.

There was one, however, who forgot nothing—who, the first torpor of despair once past, lived only to remember and avenge. He offered an enormous reward for the apprehension of the unknown murderer. He papered Rome with placards. He gave himself up, body and brain, to the task of discovery, and felt that for this, and this only, he could continue to bear the burden of life. As the chances of success seemed to grow daily more and more uncertain, his purpose but became the more assured. He would have justice; meaning by justice, blood for blood, a life for a life. And this at all costs, at all risks, at all sacrifices. He took a solemn oath to devote, if need be, all the best years of his life, all the vigour of his mind, all the strength of his manhood, to this one desperate end. For it he was ready to endure any privation, or to incur any personal danger. For it, could his purpose have been thereby assured, he would

have gladly died at any hour of the day or night. As it was, he trained himself to the work with a patience that was never wearied.

He studied to acquire the dialects, and to familiarise himself with the habits, of the lowest quarters of Rome. He frequented the small wine-shops of the Trastevere and the Rione St. Angelo. He mastered the intricacies of the Ghetto. He haunted the street fountains, the puppet-shows, and the quays of Ripa Grande. Wherever, in short, the Roman people were to be found *in fra di loro*, whether gossiping, gaming, quarrelling, or holiday-making, there Hugh Girdlestone made his way, mingled with them, listened, observed, and waited like a trapper for his prey. It was a task of untold peril and difficulty, made all the more perilous and difficult by the fact of his being a foreigner. Fluent Italian as he was, it was still not possible that he should perfectly master all the slang of the Rione,

play at morra and zecchinetta as one to the manner born, or be at all times equal to the part which he had undertaken. He was liable at any moment to betray himself, and to be poniarded for a spy. He knew each time he ventured into certain quarters of the city that his body might be floating down towards Ostia before daybreak, or that he might quite probably disappear from that moment, and never be seen or heard of more. Yet, strong in his purpose and reckless of his life, he went, and came, and went again, penetrating into haunts where the police dared not set foot, and assuming in these excursions the dress and dialect of a Roman "rough" of the lowest order.

Thus disguised, and armed with a deadly patience that knew neither weariness nor discouragement, Hugh Girdlestone pursued his quest. How, despite every precaution, he contrived to escape detection was matter for daily wonder,

even to himself. He owed his safety, however, in great measure to a sullen manner and a silent tongue—perhaps in some degree to his southern complexion; to his black beard and swarthy skin, and the lowering fire in his eyes.

Thus the Spring passed away, the Summer heats came on, and the wealthier quarters of Rome were, as usual, emptied of their inhabitants. The foreign visitors went first; then the Italian nobility; and then all those among the professional and commercial classes who could afford the healthful luxury of villeggiatura. Meanwhile, Hugh Girdlestone was the only remaining lodger in the Palazzo Bardello. Day by day he lingered on in the deserted city, wandering through the burning streets and piazzas, and down by the river-side, where the very air was heavy with malaria.

Night after night he perilled life and limb in the wine-shops of the Trastevere; and still in vain. Still the murderer re-

mained undiscovered and the murdered unavenged; still no clue, nor vestige of a clue, turned up. The police, having grown more and more languid in the work of investigation, ceased, at last, from further efforts. The placards became defaced, or were pasted over with fresh ones. By-and-by the whole story faded from people's memories; and save by one who, sleeping or waking, knew no other thought, the famous "*tragedia deplorabile*" was quite forgotten.

Thus the glowing Summer and sultry Autumn dragged slowly by. The popular festivals on Monte Testaccio were celebrated and over; the harvest was gathered in; the virulence of the malaria abated; the artists flocked back to their studios, the middle-class Romans to their homes, the nobles to their palaces. Then the Pope returned from Castel Gondolfo, and the annual tide of English and American visitors set in. By the first Sunday in Advent, Rome was already tolerably

well filled; and on the evening of that same Sunday an event took place which threw the whole city into confusion, and caused a clamour of dismay even louder than that which followed the murder of Ethel Girdlestone ten months before.

CHAPTER III.

A KNOT of loungers stood, talking eagerly, round the stove in Piale's reading-room. It was on the Monday morning following the first Sunday in Advent, and still quite early. None were reading, or attempting to read. The newspapers lay unopened on the tables. Even the last *Times* contained nothing so exciting as the topic then under discussion.

"It is to be hoped and expected that the Government will bestir itself in earnest this time," said a bald-headed Englishman, standing with his back to stove.

"Hope is one thing, my dear sir, and expectation is another," replied his nearest neighbour. "When you have lived in Rome as long as myself, you will cease to expect anything but indifference from the bureaucracy of the Papal States."

"But a crime of this enormity . . . "

"Is more easily hushed up than investigated, especially when the sufferers are in a humble station of life, and cannot offer a large reward to the police."

"Mr. Somerville puts the question quite fairly," observed another gentleman. "There is nothing like public spirit to be found throughout the length and breadth of His Holiness's dominions."

"Nor justice either, it would seem, unless one can pay for it handsomely," added another.

"Nay, your long purse is not always your short cut to justice, even in Rome," said Mr. Somerville. "There was that case of the young bride who was mur-

dered last Winter in the Palazzo Bardello. Her husband offered an immense reward —a thousand guineas English, I believe— and yet the mystery was never cleared up."

"Ay, that Palazzo Bardello murder was a tragic affair," said the bald-headed Englishman; "more tragic, on the whole, than . . . ."

A sudden change of expression swept over his face, and he broke off in the midst of his sentence.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I feel as if I were on the brink of a discovery."

"Plunge away, then, my dear fellow," laughed Somerville. "What is it?"

"Well, then—what if both these murders had been committed by the same hand?"

"Most unlikely, I should think," said one.

"Altogether improbable," added another.

"Do you opine that Othello smothered the princes in the Tower?" asked a third.

"Listen to my premises before you laugh at my conclusions," said he of the bald head, obviously nettled by the general incredulity. "Look at the details: they are almost identical. In each case the victim is stabbed to the heart; in each case the wound is almost imperceptibly small. There is no effusion of blood; no robbery is committed; and no trace of the assassin remains. I'd stake my head upon it that these are not purely accidental coincidences!"

"I beg your pardon," said a gentleman, who till now had been standing by a window at the further end of the room with his back to the speakers; "but will you have the goodness to inform me in what part of Rome this—this murder has been committed?"

"Down, I believe, in one of the narrow lanes near the theatre of Marcellus."

"And the victim is a Roman subject?"

"The child of Roman parents."

"A child!"

"A child, sir; a little fellow of only eleven years of age, and the son of a baker named Tommaseo."

The stranger took out his note-book.

"Near the theatre of Marcellus," he said, scribbling a rapid entry.

"Just so—a most shocking and mysterious affair!"

"And the name, Tommaseo. Many thanks. Good morning."

With this he lifted his hat, strode from the room, and vanished without another word.

"Humph! an abrupt sort of fellow," said the first speaker. "I wonder who he is?"

"He looks horribly ill," said another.

"I've met him before," mused Somerville. "I remember the face quite well, but the name has altogether escaped my memory. Good heavens! it is Mr. Girdlestone—the husband of that very lady who was murdered in the Palazzo Bardello!"

In the meanwhile Hugh Girdlestone was swinging along at his tremendous pace towards that quarter where the murder had been perpetrated. He found the house without difficulty, at the end of a narrow Vicolo about half-way between the Portico of Octavia and the Theatre of Marcellus. There was a crowd before the door, and a dismounted dragoon pacing up and down with his sabre under his arm. Over the shop window was suspended a board, on which were inscribed, in faded red letters, the words "ANTICO FORNO;" and at this window, where still lay unsold some three or four stale rolls of Saturday's baking, an old woman every

now and then made her appearance, and addressed wild lamentations to the by-standers.

"Alas! alas!" she cried, tossing her arms aloft like a withered Cassandra. "He was the light of our eyes! He was our darling, our sunshine, our pride! He was as good as an angel. He never told a lie in his life. Everybody loved him! At this hour yesterday his laugh made music in the house, and our hearts leaped for joy to hear it. We shall never hear that voice again—never, never more, till we hear it in heaven! He is dead! He is dead, and the blessed Virgin has him in her care. But his murderer lives. Oh *Dio*, hear it! Hear it, O blessed mother of God! Hear it, thou blessed Saint Stefano! Overtake him with your vengeance! Let his tongue wither, and his eyes melt away in blood! Let his hands and feet rot upon his body! Let his flesh drop piece-meal from his bones! Let him die un-

confessed and unabsolved, and give him over to the everlasting fire!"

"No stranger is allowed to pass, Signore," said the dragoon, interposing his person between the Englishman and the door.

But Hugh Girdlestone had only to open his pocket-book and show a certain slip of paper signed by the chief of the police. It was a magical document, and admitted him to all kinds of forbidden places.

He went in. In the outer room, or shop, he found some eight or ten persons assembled, apparently relatives and friends of the family; in a darkened room beyond, the body of a young child was laid out upon a narrow pallet strewn with immortelles and set round with lighted candles. The father, a sickly-looking man, with eyes red and swollen from weeping, was sitting upon a low stool, in a farther corner of the room, his elbows resting on his knees, and his chin upon his hands, smoking drearily. The mother lay

crouched on the floor beside the bed, in a stupor of misery.

Hugh Girdlestone apologised for his intrusion with a word or two of explanation and sympathy. The woman never stirred. The man took his pipe from his mouth, rose respectfully, and replied to such questions as his visitor thought fit to put to him.

The child's name, he said, was Stefano —Stefanino, they used to call him. He was their only child, and would have been eleven years of age in the course of a few more days. He was a particularly good boy, and as clever as he was good. He was a great favourite with the Padre Lorenzo—the famous Padre Lorenzo of whom the Signore had doubtless heard. This Padre Lorenzo had taken an especial affection for the little Stefanino, and had himself prepared the boy for his first communion. And he took it only yesterday morning—took it at the church of Il Gésu, from the hands of Monsignore di

Montalto. It was a long ceremony. There were six hundred children present, and their Stefanino was among the last who went up. When it was over they came home and dined, and after dinner they went for a walk on the Monte Pincio. Coming back they hired a vettura, for the child was very tired; and as soon as they reached home his mother gave him a cup of soup and a piece of bread, and put him to bed. This was about half-past six o'clock.

A little later in the evening—perhaps about a quarter past seven—he and his wife and his wife's mother went over to see a neighbour in the Via Fiumara close by. They left the child asleep. They had often left him so before, especially on Sunday evenings, and no harm had come of it. The wife of the shoemaker who occupied the first floor had promised to listen if he should wake or call for anything; and she was a good soul, and had children of her own. *Ebbene*, they stayed

out somewhat late—later than usual, for the neighbour in the Via Fiumara had her married daughter spending the evening with her, and they stayed gossiping till past ten o'clock. Then they came home. The shoemaker and his family were gone to bed; but the house-door was left, as usual, on the latch, and the matches and candle were in their accustomed corner in the passage. So they lit the candle, and fastened the door, and stole in very softly; for little Stefanino was a light sleeper, and apt to lie awake for hours if accidentally roused.

However, this time, although the grandmother stumbled over the *scaldino* on first going into the room, he never turned or stirred. He slept in a little crib beside their own bed, and after a few minutes they went to look at him. He was very pale; but then he had gone through a day of great fatigue and excitement, and was unusually tired. They never dreamed, at first sight, that all

was not well with him. It was his mother who discovered it. She first saw that no breath parted his dear lips—she first touched his cheek, and found it cold!

When he reached this point in his narrative, the poor baker fairly broke down, and covered his face with his hands.

"*Eccolo*, Signore," he sobbed. "He was our only little one!"

"He is with God," said Hugh Girdlestone.

He could think of nothing else to say. He was not a religious man. He was, on the contrary, a worldly, a careless, perperhaps even a somewhat hard man; and he had no words of ready comfort and sympathy at command. But he was moved, and his emotion showed itself in his voice.

"Alas! God did not want him so much as we wanted him," was the naïve reply.

The mother, who till now had lain huddled on the floor, apparently un-

conscious of all that was going forward, here suddenly lifted up her head.

"The good God and our Blessed Lady had him always," she said, hoarsely. "He was in their hands from the hour when I brought him into the world, and he is not more theirs in heaven than he was theirs on earth. But they did not call him from us. It is not God but man who has bereaved us, and left us desolate. Behold!"

And with this she rose to her feet, turned down the sheet, and uncovered the wound—just such a tiny puncture, with just such a ghastly halo spreading round it, as Hugh Girdlestone had awful cause to remember.

He could not bear to look upon it. He shuddered, and turned his face aside.

"Is there—is there anyone whom you suspect?" he faltered.

"No one."

"Have you an enemy?"

The baker shook his head.

"I think not," he replied. "I am at peace with all my neighbours."

"Was no one seen to enter the house in your absence?"

"No one, Signore."

"Did the shoemaker's wife hear no sound?"

"None whatever."

"And you have been robbed of nothing?"

"Not to the value of a *quattrino*."

The Englishman's heart sank within him. He felt profoundly discouraged. The double mystery seemed doubly impenetrable, and his double task doubly hopeless. He turned again to the little bed, and took one long, last look at the waxen figure with its folded hands and funereal chaplets.

"What is this?" he asked, pointing to a white silk scarf fringed with gold which lay folded across the feet of the corpse.

The mother snatched it up, and covered it with passionate kisses.

"It is the scarf he wore yesterday when he went up to take his first communion," she replied. "The Padre Lorenzo gave it to him. Alas! alas! how beautiful he looked, dressed in all his best, with new buckles in his shoes and this scarf tied over one shoulder! The little angels painted over the altar did not look more beautiful!"

"The Padre Lorenzo!" repeated Hugh Girdlestone. "He taught the child, you say, and loved him. Does he know this?"

"Yes, he knows it."

It was the man who replied. The woman had sunk down again upon the floor, and hidden her face.

"Has he been to see you since!"

"He sent a priest this morning to pray for the repose of our little one's soul."

"Humph!"

Tommaseo's quick Italian ear detected

the shade of disapproval in his visitor's voice.

"The Padre Lorenzo is a saint," he said, eagerly. "All Rome flocks to hear him preach."

"Where is he to be found, *amico?*"

"At the convent of the Gesuiti close by."

"So!—a Jesuit?"

"A Jesuit, Signore; so eloquent, so learned, so holy, and yet so young—so young! A holier man does not live. Though his body still walks upon earth, his soul already lives in heaven."

"I should like to see him," mused the Englishman. "He might suggest something—these Jesuits are keen and far-sighted; at all events, it is worth the effort. I will go round to the Gesuiti, *amico*, to hear if your good padre can help us."

"Our blessed Lady and all the saints reward you, dear Signore!" exclaimed the poor father, humbly attempting to

kiss the hand which Hugh Girdlestone extended to him at parting.

But the Englishman snatched it hastily away.

"Nay, nay," he said, roughly. "I have my own motive—my own wrong. No thanks—no thanks!"

And with a quick gesture, half deprecation, half farewell, he was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

VAST, sombre, dimly lighted, splendid with precious marbles and rich in famous altar-pieces, the church of Il Gesu wore that day an aspect of even gloomier grandeur than usual. Before the chapel of Saint Ignazio, a considerable crowd was assembled. All were listening devoutly. The dropping of a pin might have been heard among them. There had been no service. There was no music. No perfume of incense lingered on the air. It was simply a week-day discourse that was in process of delivery, and the preacher was Padre Lorenzo.

As Hugh Girdlestone went up the steps

and lifted the heavy leathern portière, he suddenly remembered how, on that other fatal morning of the thirteenth of February last, he had paused upon those very steps, listening to the chanting and half-disposed to enter. Why had he not followed that impulse? He could not tell. Why need the coincidence startle him now? He could not tell that, either. It was but a coincidence, commonplace and natural enough —and yet it troubled him.

He went in.

The chapel was small and held but few seats, and the crowd spread far out into the body of the church, so that the new comer had to take up his position on the outskirts of the congregation. From this place he could hear, but not see the preacher. Finding it impossible, however, to work his way nearer without disturbing others, he contented himself with listening.

The voice of the preacher was low and clear, and sounded like the voice of a

young man; but it rose every now and then to a higher key, and that higher key jarred somewhat harshly upon the ear. The subject of his discourse was death. He held it up to his hearers from every point of view—as a terror; as a reward; as a punishment; as a hope beside which all other hopes were but as the shadows of shadows. He compared the last moments of the just man with those of the sinner. He showed under what circumstances death was robbed of its sting and the grave of its victory. To the soldier falling on the field, to the martyr consuming at the stake, death was glory; to the sick and the heartbroken it was peace; to the philosopher, infinite knowledge; to the poor, infinite wealth; to all faithful Christians, joy everlasting. Happy, he said, were those who died young, for they had not lived to accumulate the full burden of human sin; happier still those who died penitent, since for

them was reserved the special mercy of Heaven.

"But what," he said—and here his voice rose to a strange pitch of tremulous exaltation—"but what shall we say to this event which is to-day on every man's tongue? What shall we say to the death of this little child—this little child who but yesterday partook of his first communion in this very church, and whose fate is even now moving all hearts to indignation and pity? Was ever pity so mistaken? Was ever death so happily timed? In the first bloom of his innocence, in the very moment of his solemn reception into the bosom of our holy Church, sinless, consecrated, absolved, he passed, pure as an angel, into the presence of his Maker. Had he lived but one day longer, he had been less pure. Had he lived to his full term of years, who shall say with what crimes his soul might not have been blackened? He might have lived to become a heretic, an atheist,

a blasphemer. He might have died with all his sins upon his head, an outcast upon earth, and an outcast from heaven! Who then shall dare to pity him? Which among us shall not envy him? Has he not gone from earth to heaven, clothed in a wedding garment, like a guest to the banquet of the saints? Has he not gone with the chaplet on his brow, the ring upon his finger, the perfume of the incense yet clinging to his hair, the wine of Christ yet fresh upon his lips? Silence, then, Oh ye of little faith! Why grieve that another voice is given to the heavenly choir? Why lament that another martyr is added to the noble army of the Lord? Let us rejoice rather than weep. Let our requiems be changed for songs of praise and thanksgiving. Shall we pity him that he is beyond the reach of sorrow? Shall we shudder at the fate that has given him to Paradise? Shall we even dare to curse the hand that sent him thither? May not that very hand have been consecrated to

the task?—have been guided by the finger of God?—have been inspired by a strength . . . . . a wisdom . . . . . no murderer; but a priest . . . . . a priest of the tabernacle . . . . . it was the voice of God . . . . . a voice from Heaven . . . . . saying . . . . . ”

He faltered — became inarticulate — stopped.

A sudden confusion fell upon the congregation; a sudden murmur rose and filled the church. In an instant all were moving, speaking, gesticulating; in an instant Hugh Girdlestone was pushing his way towards the chapel.

And the preacher? Tall, slender, wild-eyed, looking utterly helpless and bewildered, he stood before his hearers, unable, as it seemed, to speak or think. He looked quite young—about twenty-eight, or it might be thirty years, of age—but worn and haggard, as one that had prayed and fasted overmuch. Seeing Hugh Girdlestone push through the crowd and

stand suddenly before him, he shrank back like a hunted creature, and began trembling violently.

"At last! at last!" gasped the Englishman. "Confess it, murderer; confess it, before I strike you dead with my own hands!"

The priest put his hand to his head. His lips moved, but no utterance came.

"Do you know who I am?" continued Hugh, in a deep, hoarse voice that trembled with hatred. "Do you know who I am? I am the husband of Ethel Girdlestone—that Ethel Girdlestone who used to come to this very church to confess to you—to you, who slew her in her bed as you yesterday slew a little child that loved you. Devil! I remember you now. Why did I not suspect you sooner?"

"Hush!" said a grave voice in his ear. "Does the Signore forget in Whose house we are?"

It was another priest of the order, who had just come upon the scene.

"I forget nothing," replied the Englishman. "Bear witness, all present, that I charge this man with murder!"

The new comer turned to the congregation.

"And bear witness, all present," he added solemnly, with uplifted hand, "that the Padre Lorenzo is responsible for neither his words nor his deeds. He is mad."

* * * * *

And so it was. Young, eloquent, learned, an impassioned orator, and one of the most brilliant ornaments of his order, the Padre Lorenzo had for more than two years betrayed symptoms of insanity. He had committed some few extravagancies from time to time, and had broken down once or twice in a discourse; but it had never been supposed that his eccentricity had danger in it. Of the murder of Ethel Girdlestone no one had

ever for one moment dreamed that he was guilty. With the instinctive cunning of madness he had kept his first secret well. But he could not keep the second. Having ventured on the perilous subject, he betrayed himself.

From that hour he became a raving maniac, and disappeared for ever from the world. By what motive his distempered brain had been moved to the commission of these crimes, and where he had obtained the long slender dagger, scarcely thicker than a needle, with which they were perpetrated, were secrets never discovered; but it was thought by some of those who knew him best that he had slain the child to save his soul from possible sin and send him straight to Heaven. As for Ethel Girdlestone, it was probable that he had murdered her from some similar motive—most likely to preserve her against the danger of perversion by a heretic husband.

Hugh Girdlestone lives, famous and

prosperous, learned in the law, and not unlikely, it is said, to attain the woolsack by-and-by. But he lives a solitary life, and the gloom that fell upon his youth overshadows all his prosperity. He will never marry again.

THE FOUR-FIFTEEN EXPRESS

THE FOUR-FIFTEEN EXPRESS.

CHAPTER I.

THE events which I am about to relate took place between nine and ten years ago. Sebastopol had fallen in the early Spring; the peace of Paris had been concluded since March; our commercial relations with the Russian empire were but recently renewed; and I, returning home after my first northward journey since the war, was well pleased with the prospect of spending the month of December under the hospitable and thoroughly English roof of my excellent friend Jonathan Jelf, Esquire, of Dumbleton

Manor, Clayborough, East Anglia. Travelling in the interests of the well-known firm in which it is my lot to be a junior partner, I had been called upon to visit not only the capitals of Russia and Poland, but had found it also necessary to pass some weeks among the trading ports of the Baltic; whence it came that the year was already far spent before I again set foot on English soil, and that instead of shooting pheasants with him, as I had hoped, in October, I came to be my friend's guest during the more genial Christmas-tide.

My voyage over, and a few days given up to business in Liverpool and London, I hastened down to Clayborough with all the delight of a schoolboy whose holidays are at hand. My way lay by the Great East Anglian line as far as Clayborough station, where I was to be met by one of the Dumbleton carriages and conveyed across the remaining nine miles of country. It was a foggy afternoon, singularly warm

for the fourth of December, and I had arranged to leave London by the 4.15 express. The early darkness of Winter had already closed in; the lamps were lighted in the carriages; a clinging damp dimmed the windows, adhered to the door-handles, and pervaded all the atmosphere; while the gas jets at the neighbouring bookstand diffused a luminous haze that only served to make the gloom of the terminus more visible. Having arrived some seven minutes before the starting of the train, and, by the connivance of the guard, taken sole possession of an empty compartment, I lighted my travelling lamp, made myself particularly snug, and settled down to the undisturbed enjoyment of a book and a cigar. Great, therefore, was my disappointment when, at the last moment, a gentleman came hurrying along the platform, glanced into my carriage, opened the locked door with a private key, and stepped in.

It struck me at the first glance that

I had seen him before—a tall, spare man, thin-lipped, light-eyed, with an ungraceful stoop in the shoulders, and scant grey hair worn somewhat long upon the collar. He carried a light waterproof coat, an umbrella, and a large brown japanned deed-box, which last he placed under the seat. This done, he felt carefully in his breast-pocket, as if to make certain of the safety of his purse or pocket-book; laid his umbrella in the netting overhead; spread the waterproof across his knees; and exchanged his hat for a travelling cap of some Scotch material. By this time the train was moving out of the station, and into the faint grey of the wintry twilight beyond.

I now recognized my companion. I recognized him from the moment when he removed his hat and uncovered the lofty, furrowed, and somewhat narrow brow beneath. I had met him, as I distinctly remembered, some three years before, at the very house for which, in all proba-

bility, he was now bound like myself. His name was Dwerrihouse; he was a lawyer by profession; and, if I was not greatly mistaken, was first cousin to the wife of my host. I knew also that he was a man eminently "well to do," both as regarded his professional and private means. The Jelfs entertained him with that sort of observant courtesy which falls to the lot of the rich relation; the children made much of him; and the old butler, albeit somewhat surly "to the general," treated him with deference. I thought, observing him by the vague mixture of lamplight and twilight, that Mrs. Jelf's cousin looked all the worse for the three years' wear and tear which had gone over his head since our last meeting. He was very pale, and had a restless light in his eye that I did not remember to have observed before. The anxious lines, too, about his mouth were deepened, and there was a cavernous hollow look about his cheeks and temples

which seemed to speak of sickness or sorrow. He had glanced at me as he came in, but without any gleam of recognition in his face. Now he glanced again, as I fancied, somewhat doubtfully. When he did so for the third or fourth time, I ventured to address him.

"Mr. John Dwerrihouse, I think?"

"That is my name," he replied.

"I had the pleasure of meeting you at Dumbleton about three years ago."

Mr. Dwerrihouse bowed.

"I thought I knew your face," he said. "But your name, I regret to say—"

"Langford—William Langford. I have known Jonathan Jelf since we were boys together at Merchant Taylor's, and I generally spend a few weeks at Dumbleton in the shooting season. I suppose we are bound for the same destination?"

"Not if you are on your way to the Manor," he replied. "I am travelling upon business—rather troublesome busi-

ness, too—whilst you, doubtless, have only pleasure in view."

"Just so. I am in the habit of looking forward to this visit as to the brightest three weeks in all the year."

"It is a pleasant house," said Mr. Dwerrihouse.

"The pleasantest I know."

"And Jelf is thoroughly hospitable."

"The best and kindest fellow in the world!"

"They have invited me to spend Christmas week with them," pursued Mr. Dwerrihouse, after a moment's pause.

"And you are coming?"

"I cannot tell. It must depend on the issue of this business which I have in hand. You have heard, perhaps, that we are about to construct a branch line from Blackwater to Stockbridge."

I explained that I had been for some months away from England, and had therefore heard nothing of the contemplated improvement.

Mr. Dwerrihouse smiled complacently.

"It *will* be an improvement," he said; "a great improvement. Stockbridge is a flourishing town, and only needs a more direct railway communication with the metropolis to become an important centre of commerce. This branch was my own idea. I brought the project before the board, and have myself superintended the execution of it up to the present time."

"You are an East Anglian director, I presume?"

"My interest in the company," replied Mr. Dwerrihouse, "is threefold. I am a director; I am a considerable shareholder; and, as head of the firm of Dwerrihouse, Dwerrihouse, and Craik, I am the company's principal solicitor."

Loquacious, self-important, full of his pet project, and apparently unable to talk on any other subject, Mr. Dwerrihouse then went on to tell of the opposition he had encountered and the obstacles

he had overcome in the cause of the Stockbridge branch. I was entertained with a multitude of local details and local grievances. The rapacity of one squire; the impracticability of another; the indignation of the rector whose glebe was threatened; the culpable indifference of the Stockbridge townspeople, who could *not* be brought to see that their most vital interests hinged upon a junction with the Great East Anglian line; the spite of the local newspaper; and the unheard-of difficulties attending the Common question, were each and all laid before me with a circumstantiality that possessed the deepest interest for my excellent fellow-traveller, but none whatever for myself. From these, to my despair, he went on to more intricate matters: to the approximate expenses of construction per mile; to the estimates sent in by different contractors; to the probable traffic returns of the new line: to the provisional clauses of the new Act as enumerated in Schedule

D of the company's last half-yearly report; and so on, and on, and on till my head ached, and my attention flagged, and my eyes kept closing in spite of every effort that I made to keep them open. At length I was roused by these words :—

"Seventy-five thousand pounds, cash down."

"Seventy-five thousand pounds, cash down," I repeated, in the liveliest tone I could assume. "That is a heavy sum."

"A heavy sum to carry here," replied Mr. Dwerrihouse, pointing significantly to his breast-pocket; "but a mere fraction of what we shall have ultimately have to pay."

"You do not mean to say that you have seventy-five thousand pounds at this moment upon your person?" I exclaimed.

"My good Sir, have I not been telling you so for the last half hour?" said Mr. Dwerrihouse, testily. "That money has to be paid over at half-past eight o'clock

this evening, at the office of Sir Thomas's solicitors, on completion of the deed of sale."

"But how will you get across by night from Blackwater to Stockbridge with seventy-five thousand pounds in your pocket?"

"To Stockbridge!" echoed the lawyer. "I find I have made myself very imperfectly understood. I thought I had explained how this sum carries our new line only as far as Mallingford—this first stage, as it were, of our journey—and how our route from Blackwater to Mallingford lies entirely through Sir Thomas Liddell's property."

"I beg your pardon." I stammered. "I fear my thoughts were wandering. So you only go as far as Mallingford to-night?"

"Precisely. I shall get a conveyance from the 'Blackwater Arms.' And you?"

"Oh, Jelf sends a trap to meet me at

Clayborough. Can I be the bearer of any message from you?"

"You may say if you please, Mr. Langford, that I wished I could have been your companion all the way, and that I will come over if possible before Christmas."

"Nothing more?"

Mr. Dwerrihouse smiled grimly.

"Well," he said, "you may tell my cousin that she need not burn the hall down in my honour *this* time, and that I shall be obliged if she will order the blue-room chimney to be swept before I arrive."

"That sounds tragic. Had you a conflagration on the occasion of your last visit to Dumbleton?"

"Something like it. There had been no fire lighted in my bedroom since the spring, the flue was foul, and the rooks had built in it; so when I went up to dress for dinner, I found the room full of smoke, and the chimney on fire. Are we already at Blackwater?"

The train had gradually come to a pause while Mr. Dwerrihouse was speaking, and on putting my head out of the window, I could see the station some few hundred yards ahead. There was another train before us blocking the way, and the ticket-taker was making use of the delay to collect the Blackwater tickets. I had scarcely ascertained our position, when the ruddy-faced official appeared at our carriage door.

"Ticket, Sir!" said he.

"I am for Clayborough," I replied, holding out the tiny pink card.

He took it; glanced at it by the light of his little lantern; gave it back; looked, as I fancied, somewhat sharply at my fellow-traveller, and disappeared.

"He did not ask for yours," I said with some surprise.

"They never do," replied Mr. Dwerrihouse. "They all know me; and of course, I travel free."

"Blackwater! Blackwater!" cried the

porter, running along the platform beside us, as we glided into the station.

Mr. Dwerrihouse pulled out his deed box, put his travelling-cap in his pocket, resumed his hat, took down his umbrella, and prepared to be gone.

"Many thanks, Mr. Langford, for your society," he said, with old-fashioned courtesy. "I wish you a good evening."

"Good evening," I replied, putting out my hand.

But he either did not see it, or did not choose to see it, and, slightly lifting his hat, stepped out upon the platform. Having done this, he moved slowly away, and mingled with the departing crowd.

Leaning forward to watch him out of sight, I trod upon something which proved to be a cigar-case. It had fallen, no doubt, from the pocket of his waterproof coat, and was made of dark morocco leather, with a silver monogram upon the

side. I sprang out of the carriage just as the guard came up to lock me in.

"Is there one minute to spare?" I asked eagerly. "The gentleman who travelled down with me from town has dropped his cigar-case—he is not yet out of the station!"

"Just a minute and a half, Sir," replied the guard. "You must be quick."

I dashed along the platform as fast as my feet could carry me. It was a large station, and Mr. Dwerrihouse had by this time got more than halfway to the farther end.

I, however, saw him distinctly, moving slowly with the stream. Then, as I drew nearer, I saw that he had met some friend —that they were talking as they walked— that they presently fell back somewhat from the crowd, and stood aside in earnest conversation. I made straight for the spot where they were waiting. There was a vivid gas-jet just above their heads, and the light fell full upon their faces. I

saw both distinctly—the face of Mr. Dwerrihouse and the face of his companion. Running, breathless, eager as I was, getting in the way of porters and passengers, and fearful every instant lest I should see the train going on without me, I yet observed that the new-comer was considerably younger and shorter than the director, that he was sandy-haired, mustachioed, small-featured, and dressed in a close-cut suit of Scotch tweed. I was now within a few yards of them. I ran against a stout gentleman—I was nearly knocked down by a luggage-truck —I stumbled over a carpet-bag—I gained the spot just as the driver's whistle warned me to return.

To my utter stupefaction they were no longer there. I had seen them but two seconds before—and they were gone! I stood still. I looked to right and left. I saw no sign of them in any direction. It was as if the platform had gaped and swallowed them.

"There were two gentlemen standing here a moment ago," I said to a porter at my elbow; "which way can they have gone?"

"I saw no gentlemen, Sir," replied the man.

The whistle shrilled out again. The guard, far up the platform, held up his arm, and shouted to me to "Come on!"

"If you're going on by this train, Sir," said the porter, "you must run for it."

I did run for it—just gained the carriage as the train began to move—was shoved in by the guard, and left breathless and bewildered, with Mr. Dwerrihouse's cigar-case still in my hand.

It was the strangest disappearance in the world. It was like a transformation trick in a pantomime. They were there one moment — palpably there — talking—with the gaslight full upon their faces; and the next moment they were gone. There was no door near—no window—no staircase. It was a mere slip of barren platform,

tapestried with big advertisements. Could anything be more mysterious?

It was not worth thinking about; and yet, for my life, I could not help pondering upon it—pondering, wondering, conjecturing, turning it over and over in my mind, and beating my brains for a solution of the enigma. I thought of it all the way from Blackwater to Clayborough. I thought of it all the way from Clayborough to Dumbleton, as I rattled along the smooth highway in a trim dog-cart drawn by a splendid black mare, and driven by the silentest and dapperest of East Anglian grooms.

We did the nine miles in something less than an hour, and pulled up before the lodge-gates just as the church clock was striking half-past seven. A couple of minutes more, and the warm glow of the lighted hall was flooding out upon the gravel; a hearty grasp was on my hand; and a clear jovial voice was bidding me "Welcome to Dumbleton."

"And now, my dear fellow," said my host, when the first greeting was over, "you have no time spare. We dine at eight, and there are people coming to meet you; so you must just get the dressing business over as quickly as may be. By the way, you will meet some acquaintances. The Biddulphs are coming, and Prendergast (Prendergast, of the Skirmishers) is staying in the house. Adieu! Mrs. Jelf will be expecting you in the drawing-room."

I was ushered to my room—not the blue room, of which Mr. Dwerrihouse had made disagreeable experience, but a pretty little bachelor's chamber, hung with a delicate chintz, and made cheerful by a blazing fire. I unlocked my portmanteau. I tried to be expeditious; but the memory of my railway adventure haunted me. I could not get free of it. I could not shake it off. It impeded me—it worried me—it tripped me up—it caused me to mislay my studs—to mistie my cravat—to wrench

the buttons off my gloves. Worst of all, it made me so late that the party had all assembled before I reached the drawing-room. I had scarcely paid my respects to Mrs. Jelf when dinner was announced, and we paired off, some eight or ten couples strong, into the dining-roon.

I am not going to describe either the guests or the dinner. All provincial parties bear the strictest family resemblance, and I am not aware that an East Anglian banquet offers any exception to the rule. There was the usual country baronet and his wife; there were the usual country parsons and their wives; there was the sempiternal turkey and haunch of venison. *Vanitas vanitatum.* There is nothing new under the sun.

I was placed about midway down the table. I had taken one rector's wife down to dinner, and I had another at my left hand. They talked across me, and their talk was about babies. It was dreadfully dull. At length there came a pause. The entrées had just

been removed, and the turkey had come upon the scene. The conversation had all along been of the languidest, but at this moment it happened to have stagnated altogether. Jelf was carving the turkey. Mrs. Jelf looked as if she was trying to think of something to say. Everybody else was silent. Moved by an unlucky impulse, I thought I would relate my adventure.

"By the way, Jelf," I began, "I came down part of the way to-day with a friend of yours."

"Indeed!" said the master of the feast, slicing scientifically into the breast of the turkey. "With whom, pray?"

"With one who bade me tell you that he should, if possible, pay you a visit before Christmas."

"I cannot think who that could be," said my friend, smiling.

"It must be Major Thorp," suggested Mrs. Jelf.

I shook my head.

"It was not Major Thorp," I replied. "It was a near relation of your own, Mrs. Jelf."

"Then I am more puzzled than ever," replied my hostess. "Pray tell me who it was."

"It was no less a person than your cousin, Mr. John Dwerrihouse."

Jonathan Jelf laid down his knife and fork. Mrs. Jelf looked at me in a strange, startled way, and said never a word.

"And he desired me to tell you, my dear madam, that you need not take the trouble to burn the Hall down in his honour this time; but only to have the chimney of the blue room swept before his arrival."

Before I had reached the end of my sentence, I became aware of something ominous in the faces of the guests. I felt I had said something which I had better have left unsaid, and that for some unexplained reason my words had evoked a general consternation. I sat confounded,

not daring to utter another syllable, and for at least two whole minutes there was dead silence round the table.

Then Captain Prendergast came to the rescue.

"You have been abroad for some months, have you not, Mr. Langford?" he said, with the desperation of one who flings himself into the breach. "I heard you had been to Russia. Surely you have something to tell us of the state and temper of the country after the war?"

I was heartily grateful to the gallant Skirmisher for this diversion in my favour. I answered him, I fear, somewhat lamely; but he kept the conversation up, and presently one or two others joined in, and so the difficulty, whatever it might have been, was bridged over. Bridged over, but not repaired. A something, an awkwardness, a visible constraint remained. The guests hitherto had been

simply dull; but now they were evidently uncomfortable and embarrassed.

The dessert had scarcely been placed upon the table when the ladies left the room. I seized the opportunity to drop into a vacant chair next Captain Prendergast.

"In Heaven's name," I whispered, "what was the matter just now? What had I said?"

"You mentioned the name of John Dwerrihouse."

"What of that? I had seen him not two hours before."

"It is a most astounding circumstance that you should have seen him," said Captain Prendergast. "Are you sure it was he?"

"As sure as of my own identity. We were talking all the way between London and Blackwater. But why does that surprise you?"

"*Because*," replied Captain Prendergast, dropping his voice to the lowest

whisper—"*because John Dwerrihouse absconded three months ago, with seventy-five thousand pounds of the Company's money, and has never been heard of since.*"

CHAPTER II.

JOHN DWERRIHOUSE had absconded three months ago—and I had seen him only a few hours back. John Dwerrihouse had embezzled seventy-five thousand pounds of the Company's money—yet told me that he carried that sum upon his person. Were ever facts so strangely incongruous, so difficult to reconcile? How should he have ventured again into the light of day? How dared he show himself along the line? Above all, what had he been doing throughout those mysterious three months of disappearance?

Perplexing questions these. Questions

which at once suggested themselves to the minds of all concerned, but which admitted of no easy solution. I could find no reply to them. Captain Prendergast had not even a suggestion to offer. Jonathan Jelf, who seized the first opportunity of drawing me aside and learning all that I had to tell, was more amazed and bewildered than either of us. He came to my room that night when all the guests were gone, and we talked the thing over from every point of view—without, it must be confessed, arriving at any kind of conclusion.

"I do not ask you," he said, "whether you can have mistaken your man. That is impossible."

"As impossible as that I should mistake some stranger for yourself."

"It is not a question of looks or voice, but of facts. That he should have alluded to the fire in the blue room is proof enough of John Dwerrihouse's identity. How did he look?"

"Older, I thought. Considerably older, paler, and more anxious."

"He has had enough to make him look anxious, anyhow," said my friend, gloomily; "be he innocent or guilty."

"I am inclined to believe he is innocent," I replied. "He showed no embarrassment when I addressed him, and no uneasiness when the guard came round. His conversation was open to a fault. I might almost say that he talked too freely of the business which he had in hand."

"That again is strange; for I know no one more reticent on such subjects. He actually told you that he had the seventy-five thousand pounds in his pocket?"

"He did."

"Humph! My wife has an idea about it, and she may be right—"

"What idea?"

"Well, she fancies—women are so clever, you know, at putting themselves inside people's motives—she fancies that he was tempted; that he did actually

take the money; and that he has been concealing himself these three months in some wild part of the country—struggling possibly with his conscience all the time, and daring neither to abscond with his booty, nor to come back and restore it."

"But now that he has come back?"

"That is the point. She conceives that he has probably thrown himself upon the Company's mercy; made restitution of the money; and, being forgiven, is permitted to carry the business through as if nothing whatever had happened."

"The last," I replied, "is an impossible case. Mrs. Jelf thinks like a generous and delicate-minded woman; but not in the least like a board of railway directors. They would never carry forgiveness so far."

"I fear not; and yet it is the only conjecture that bears a semblance of likelihood. However, we can run over

to Clayborough to-morrow, and see if anything is to be learned. By the way, Prendergast tells me you picked up his cigar-case."

"I did—and here it is."

Jelf took the cigar case, examined it, and said at once that it was beyond doubt Mr. Dwerrihouse's property, and that he remembered to have seen him use it.

"Here, too, is his monogram on the side," he added. "A big J transfixing a capital D. He used to carry the same on his note paper."

"It proves, at all events, that I was not dreaming."

"Ay; but it is time you were asleep and dreaming now. I am ashamed to have kept you so long. Good night."

"Good night, and remember that I am more than ready to go with you to Clayborough, or Blackwater, or London, or anywhere, if I can be of the least service."

"Thanks! I know you mean it, old friend, and it may be that I shall put you to the test. Once more, good night."

So we parted for that night, and met again in the breakfast-room at half-past eight next morning. It was a hurried, silent, uncomfortable meal. None of us had slept well, and all were thinking of the same subject. Mrs. Jelf had evidently been crying; Jelf was impatient to be off; and both Captain Prendergast and myself felt ourselves to be in the painful position of outsiders, who are involuntarily brought into a domestic trouble. Within twenty minutes after we had left the breakfast-table, the dog-cart was brought round, and my friend and I were on the road to Clayborough.

"Tell you what it is, Langford," he said, as we sped along between the wintry hedges, "I do not much fancy bringing up Dwerrihouse's name at Clayborough. All the officials know that he is my wife's relation, and the subject just now is

hardly a pleasant one. If you don't much mind, we will take the 11.10 train to Blackwater. It's an important station, and we shall stand a far better chance of picking up information there than at Clayborough."

So we took the 11.10, which happened to be an express, and, arriving at Blackwater about a quarter before twelve, proceeded at once to prosecute our inquiry.

We began by asking for the station-master—a big, blunt, business-like person, who at once averred that he knew Mr. John Dwerrihouse perfectly well, and that there was no director on the line whom he had seen and spoken to so frequently.

"He used to be down here two or three times a-week, about three months ago," said he, "when the new line was first set afoot; but since then, you know, gentlemen——"

He paused, significantly.

Jelf flushed scarlet.

"Yes, yes," he said hurriedly, "we

know all about that. The point now to be ascertained is whether anything has been seen or heard of him lately."

"Not to my knowledge," replied the station-master.

"He is not known to have been down the line any time yesterday, for instance?"

The station-master shook his head.

"The East Anglian, sir," said he, "is about the last place where he would dare to show himself. Why, there isn't a station-master, there isn't a guard, there isn't a porter, who doesn't know Mr. Dwerrihouse by sight as well as he knows his own face in the looking-glass; or who wouldn't telegraph for the police as soon as he had set eyes on him at any point along the line. Bless you, sir! there's been a standing order out against him ever since the twenty-fifth of September last."

"And yet," pursued my friend, "a gentleman who travelled down yesterday

from London to Clayborough by the afternoon express, testifies that he saw Mr. Dwerrihouse in the train, and that Mr. Dwerrihouse alighted at Blackwater station."

"Quite impossible, sir," replied the station-master, promptly.

"Why impossible?"

"Because there is no station along the line where he is so well known, or where he would run so great a risk. It would be just running his head into the lion's mouth. He would have been mad to come nigh Blackwater station; and if he had come, he would have been arrested before he left the platform."

"Can you tell me who took the Blackwater tickets of that train?"

"I can, sir. It was the guard—Benjamin Somers."

"And where can I find him?"

"You can find him, sir, by staying here, if you please, till one o'clock. He will be coming through with the up Ex-

press from Crampton, which stays at Blackwater for ten minutes."

We waited for the up Express, beguiling the time as best we could by strolling along the Blackwater road till we came almost to the outskirts of the town, from which the station was distant nearly a couple of miles. By one o'clock we were back again upon the platform, and waiting for the train. It came punctually, and I at once recognized the ruddy-faced guard who had gone down with my train the evening before.

"The gentlemen want to ask you something about Mr. Dwerrihouse, Somers," said the station-master, by way of introduction.

The guard flashed a keen glance from my face to Jelf's, and back again to mine.

"Mr. John Dwerrihouse, the late director?" said he, interrogatively.

"The same," replied my friend. "Should you know him if you saw him?"

"Anywhere, sir."

"Do you know if he was in the 4.15 Express yesterday afternoon?"

"He was not, sir."

"How can you answer so positively?"

"Because I looked into every carriage, and saw every face in that train, and I could take my oath that Mr. Dwerrihouse was not in it. This gentleman was," he added, turning sharply upon me. "I don't know that I ever saw him before in my life, but I remember *his* face perfectly. You nearly missed taking your seat in time at this station, sir, and you got out at Clayborough."

"Quite true," I replied; "but do you not also remember the face of the gentleman who travelled down in the the same carriage with me as far as here?"

"It was my impression, sir, that you travelled down alone," said Somers, with a look of some surprise.

"By no means. I had a fellow-traveller

as far as Blackwater, and it was in trying to restore him the cigar-case which he had dropped in the carriage, that I so nearly let you go on without me."

"I remember your saying something about a cigar-case, certainly," replied the guard, "but——"

"You asked for my ticket just before we entered the station."

"I did, sir."

"Then you must have seen him. He sat in the corner next the very door to which you came."

"No, indeed. I saw no one."

I looked at Jelf. I began to think the guard was in the ex-director's confidence, and paid for his silence.

"If I had seen another traveller I should have asked for his ticket," added Somers. "Did you see me ask for his ticket, sir?"

"I observed that you did not ask for it, but he explained that by saying——."

I hesitated. I feared I might be telling too much, and so broke off abruptly.

The guard and the station-master exchanged glances. The former looked impatiently at his watch.

"I am obliged to go in four minutes more, sir," he said.

"One last question, then," interposed Jelf, with a sort of desperation. "If this gentleman's fellow-traveller had been Mr. John Dwerrihouse, and he had been sitting in the corner next the door by which you took the tickets, could you have failed to see and recognize him?"

"No, sir; it would have been quite impossible."

"And you are certain you did *not* see him?"

"As I said before, sir, I could take my oath I did not see him. And if it wasn't that I don't like to contradict a gentleman, I would say I could also take my oath that this gentleman was quite alone in the carriage the whole way

from London to Clayborough. Why, sir," he added, dropping his voice so as to be inaudible to the station-master, who had been called away to speak to some person close by, "you expressly asked me to give you a compartment to yourself, and I did so. I locked you in, and you were so good as to give me something for myself."

"Yes; but Mr. Dwerrihouse had a key of his own."

"I never saw him, sir; I saw no one in the compartment but yourself. Beg pardon, sir, my time's up."

And with this the ruddy guard touched his cap and was gone. In another minute the heavy panting of the engine began afresh, and the train glided slowly out of the station.

We looked at each other for some moments in silence. I was the first to speak.

"Mr. Benjamin Somers knows more than he chooses to tell," I said.

"Humph! do you think so?"

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"Mr. Benjamin Somers knows more than he chooses to tell," I said.

"Humph! do you think so?"

"It must be. He could not have come to the door without seeing him. It's impossible."

"There is one thing not impossible, my dear fellow."

"What is that?"

"That you may have fallen asleep, and dreamt the whole thing."

"Could I dream of a branch line that I had never heard of? Could I dream of a hundred and one business details that had no kind of interest for me? Could I dream of the seventy-five thousand pounds?"

"Perhaps you might have seen, or heard, some vague account of the affair while you were abroad. It might have made no impression upon you at the time, and might have come back to you in your dreams—recalled, perhaps, by the mere names of the stations on the line."

"What about the fire in the chimney of the blue room—should I have heard of that during my journey?"

"Well, no; I admit there is a difficulty about that point."

"And what about the cigar-case?"

"Ay, by Jove! there is the cigar-case. That *is* a stubborn fact. Well, it's a mysterious affair, and it will need a better detective than myself, I fancy, to clear it up. I suppose we may as well go home."

CHAPTER III.

A WEEK had not gone by when I received a letter from the Secretary of the East Anglian Railway Company, requesting the favour of my attendance at a special board meeting, not then many days distant. No reasons were alleged, and no apologies offered, for this demand upon my time; but they had heard, it was clear, of my inquiries about the missing director, and had a mind to put me through some sort of official examination upon the subject. Being still a guest at Dumbleton Hall, I had to go up to London for the purpose, and Jonathan

Jelf accompanied me. I found the direction of the Great East Anglian line represented by a party of some twelve or fourteen gentlemen seated in solemn conclave round a huge green-baize table in a gloomy Board-room adjoining the London terminus.

Being courteously received by the chairman (who at once began by saying that certain statements of mine respecting Mr. John Dwerrihouse had come to the knowledge of the direction, and that they in consequence desired to confer with me on those points), we were placed at the table, and the inquiry proceeded in due form.

I was first asked if I knew Mr. John Dwerrihouse, how long I had been acquainted with him, and whether I could identify him at sight. I was then asked when I had seen him last. To which I replied, "On the fourth of this present month, December, eighteen hundred and fifty-six."

Then came the inquiry of where I had seen him on that fourth day of December; to which I replied that I met him in a first-class compartment of the 4.15 down-Express; that he got in just as the train was leaving the London terminus, and that he alighted at Blackwater station. The chairman then inquired whether I had held any communication with my fellow-traveller; whereupon I related, as nearly as I could remember it, the whole bulk and substance of Mr. John Dwerrihouse's diffuse information respecting the new branch line.

To all this the board listened with profound attention, while the chairman presided and the secretary took notes. I then produced the cigar-case. It was passed from hand to hand, and recognised by all. There was not a man present who did not remember that plain cigar-case with its silver monogram, or to whom it seemed anything less than

entirely corroborative of my evidence.

When, at length, I had told all that I had to tell, the chairman whispered something to the secretary; the secretary touched a silver hand-bell; and the guard, Benjamin Somers, was ushered into the room. He was then examined as carefully as myself. He declared that he knew Mr. John Dwerrihouse perfectly well; that he could not be mistaken in him; that he remembered going down with the 4.15 Express on the afternoon in question; that he remembered me; and that, there being one or two empty first-class compartments on that especial afternoon, he had, in compliance with my request, placed me in a carriage by myself. He was positive that I remained alone all the way in that compartment from London to Clayborough, He was ready to take his oath that Mr. Dwerrihouse was neither in that carriage with me, nor in any compartment of that train. He remembered distinctly to have examined

my ticket at Blackwater; was certain that there was no one else at that time in the carriage; could not have failed to observe a second person, if there had been one; had that second person been Mr. John Dwerrihouse, should have quietly double-locked the door of carriage, and have given information to the Blackwater station-master. So clear, so decisive, so ready, was Somers with this testimony, that the board looked fairly puzzled.

"You hear this person's statement, Mr. Langford," said the chairman. "It contradicts yours in every particular. What have you to say in reply?"

"I can only repeat what I said before. I am quite as positive of the truth of my own assertions as Mr. Somers can be of the truth of his.'"

"You say that Mr. Dwerrihouse alighted at Blackwater, and that he was in possession of a private key. Are you sure that he had not alighted by means

of that key before the guard came round for the tickets ?"

"I am quite positive that he did not leave the carriage till the train had fairly entered the station and the other Blackwater passengers alighted. I even saw that he was met there by a friend."

" Indeed ! Did you see that person distinctly ?"

" Quite distinctly."

" Can you describe his appearance ?"

" I think so. He was short and very slight, sandy-haired, with a bushy moustache and beard, and he wore a closely-fitting suit of grey tweed. His age I should take to be about thirty-eight or forty."

" Did Mr. Dwerrihouse leave the station in this person's company ?"

" I cannot tell. I saw them walking together down the platform, and then I saw them standing aside under a gas-jet, talking earnestly. After that I lost

sight of them quite suddenly; and just then my train went on, and I with it."

The chairman and secretary conferred together in an undertone. The directors whispered to each other. One or two looked suspiciously at the guard. I could see that my evidence remained unshaken, and that, like myself, they suspected some complicity between the guard and the defaulter.

"How far did you conduct that 4.15 express on the day in question, Somers?" asked the chairman.

"All through, sir," replied the guard; "from London to Crampton."

"How was it that you were not relieved at Clayborough? I thought there was always a change of guards at Clayborough."

"There used to be, sir, till the new regulations came in force last Midsummer; since when, the guards in charge of Express trains go the whole way through."

The chairman turned to the secretary.

"I think it would be as well," he said, "if we had the day-book to refer to upon this point."

Again the secretary touched the silver hand-bell, and desired the porter in attendance to summon Mr. Raikes. From a word or two dropped by another of the directors, I gathered that Mr. Raikes was one of the under-secretaries.

He came—a small, slight, sandy-haired, keen-eyed man, with an eager, nervous manner, and a forest of light beard and moustache. He just showed himself at the door of the board-room, and being requested to bring a certain day-book from a certain shelf in a certain room, bowed and vanished.

He was there such a moment, and the surprise of seeing him was so great and sudden, that it was not till the door had closed upon him that I found voice to speak. He was no sooner gone, however, than I sprang to my feet.

"That person," I said, "is the same who met Mr. Dwerrihouse upon the platform at Blackwater!"

There was a general movement of surprise. The chairman looked grave, and somewhat agitated.

"Take care, Mr. Langford," he said, "take care what you say!"

"I am as positive of his identity as of my own."

"Do you consider the consequences of your words? Do you consider that you are bringing a charge of the gravest character against one of the company's servants?"

"I am willing to be put upon my oath, if necessary. The man who came to that door a minute since is the same whom I saw talking with Mr. Dwerrihouse on the Blackwater platform. Were he twenty times the company's servant, I could say neither more nor less."

The chairman turned again to the guard.

"Did you see Mr. Raikes in the train, or on the platform?" he asked.

Somers shook his head.

"I am confident Mr. Raikes was not in the train," he said; "and I certainly did not see him on the platform."

The chairman turned next to the secretary.

"Mr. Raikes is in your office, Mr. Hunter," he said. "Can you remember if he was absent on the fourth instant?"

"I do not think he was," replied the secretary; "but I am not prepared to speak positively. I have been away most afternoons myself lately, and Mr. Raikes might easily have absented himself if he had been disposed."

At this moment the under-secretary returned with the day-book under his arm.

"Be pleased to refer, Mr. Raikes," said the chairman, "to the entries of the fourth instant, and see what Benjamin Somers' duties were on that day."

Mr. Raikes threw open the cumbrous

volume, and ran a practised eye and finger down some three or four successive columns of entries. Stopping suddenly at the foot of a page, he then read aloud that Benjamin Somers had on that day conducted the 4.15 express from London to Crampton.

The chairman leaned forward in his seat, looked the under-secretary full in the face, and said, quite sharply and suddenly:—

"Where were *you*, Mr. Raikes, on the same afternoon?"

"*I*, sir?"

"You, Mr. Raikes. Where were you on the afternoon and evening of the fourth of the present month?"

"Here, sir—in Mr. Hunter's office. Where else should I be?"

There was a dash of trepidation in the under-secretary's voice as he said this; but his look of surprise was natural enough.

"We have some reason for believing,

Mr. Raikes, that you were absent that afternoon without leave. Was this the case?"

"Certainly not, sir. I have not had a day's holiday since September. Mr. Hunter will bear me out in this."

Mr. Hunter repeated what he had previously said on the subject, but added that the clerks in the adjoining office would be certain to know. Whereupon the senior clerk, a grave, middle-aged person, in green glasses, was summoned and interrogated.

His testimony cleared the under-secretary at once. He declared that Mr. Raikes had in no instance, to his knowledge, been absent during office hours since his return from his annual holiday in September.

I was confounded.

The chairman turned to me with a smile, in which a shade of covert annoyance was scarcely apparent.

"You hear, Mr. Langford?" he said.

"I hear, sir; but my conviction remains unshaken."

"I fear, Mr. Langford, that your convictions are very insufficiently based," replied the chairman, with a doubtful cough. "I fear that you 'dream dreams,' and mistake them for actual occurrences. It is a dangerous habit of mind, and might lead to dangerous results. Mr. Raikes here would have found himself in an unpleasant position, had he not proved so satisfactory an *alibi*."

I was about to reply, but he gave me no time.

"I think, gentlemen," he went on to say, addressing the board, "that we should be wasting time to push this inquiry farther. Mr. Langford's evidence would seem to be of an equal value throughout. The testimony of Benjamin Somers disproves his first statement, and the testimony of the last witness disproves his second. I think we may conclude that Mr. Langford fell asleep in the train

on the occasion of his journey to Clayborough, and dreamt an unusually vivid and circumstantial dream—of which, however, we have now heard quite enough."

There are few things more annoying than to find one's positive convictions met with incredulity. I could not help feeling impatience at the turn that affairs had taken. I was not proof against the civil sarcasm of the chairman's manner. Most intolerable of all, however, was the quiet smile lurking about the corners of Benjamin Somers' mouth, and the half-triumphant, half-malicious gleam in the eyes of the under-secretary. The man was evidently puzzled, and somewhat alarmed. His looks seemed furtively to interrogate me. Who was I? What did I want? Why had I come there to do him an ill turn with his employers? What was it to me whether or not he was absent without leave?

Seeing all this, and perhaps more irritated by it than the thing deserved,

I begged leave to detain the attention of the board for a moment longer. Jelf plucked me impatiently by the sleeve.

"Better let the thing drop," he whispered. "The chairman's right enough. You dreamt it; and the less said now, the better."

I was not to be silenced, however, in this fashion. I had yet something to say, and I would say it. It was to this effect:—That dreams were not usually productive of tangible results, and that I requested to know in what way the chairman conceived I had evolved from my dream so substantial and well-made a delusion as the cigar-case which I had had the honour to place before him at the commencement of our interview.

"The cigar-case, I admit, Mr. Langford," the chairman replied, "is a very strong point in your evidence. It is your *only* strong point, however, and there is just a possibility that we may all be misled by a mere accidental resemblance. Will

you permit me to see the case again?"

"It is unlikely," I said, as I handed it to him, "that any other should bear precisely this monogram, and also be in all other particulars exactly similar."

The chairman examined it for a moment in silence, and then passed it to Mr. Hunter. Mr. Hunter turned it over and over, and shook his head.

"This is no mere resemblance," he said. "It is John Dwerrihouse's cigar-case to a certainty. I remember it perfectly. I have seen it a hundred times."

"I believe I may say the same," added the chairman. "Yet how shall we account for the way in which Mr. Langford asserts that it came into his possession?"

"I can only repeat," I replied, "that I found it on the floor of the carriage after Mr. Dwerrihouse had alighted. It was in leaning out to look after him that I trod upon it; and it was in

running after him for the purpose of restoring it that I saw—or believed I saw—Mr. Raikes standing aside with him in earnest conversation."

Again I felt Jonathan Jelf plucking at my sleeve.

"Look at Raikes," he whispered. "Look at Raikes!"

I turned to where the under-secretary had been standing a moment before, and saw him, white as death, with lips trembling and livid, stealing towards the door.

To conceive a sudden, strange, and indefinite suspicion; to fling myself in his way; to take him by the shoulders as if he were a child, and turn his craven face, perforce, towards the board, was with me the work of an instant.

"Look at him!" I exclaimed. "Look at his face! I ask no better witness to the truth of my words."

The chairman's brow darkened.

"Mr. Raikes," he said, sternly, "if

you know anything, you had better speak."

Vainly trying to wrench himself from my grasp, the under-secretary stammered out an incoherent denial.

"Let me go!" he said. "I know nothing—you have no right to detain me—let me go!"

"Did you, or did you not, meet Mr. John Dwerrihouse at Blackwater Station? The charge brought against you is either true or false. If true, you will do well to throw yourself upon the mercy of the board, and make full confession of all that you know."

The under-secretary wrung his hands in an agony of helpless terror.

"I was away," he cried. "I was two hundred miles away at the time! I know nothing about it—I have nothing to confess—I am innocent—I call God to witness I am innocent!"

"Two hundred miles away!" echoed the chairman. "What do you mean?"

"I was in Devonshire. I had three weeks' leave of absence—I appeal to Mr. Hunter—Mr. Hunter knows I had three weeks' leave of absence! I was in Devonshire all the time—I can prove I was in Devonshire!"

Seeing him so abject, so incoherent, so wild with apprehension, the directors began to whisper gravely among themselves; while one got quietly up, and called the porter to guard the door.

"What has your being in Devonshire to do with the matter?" said the chairman. "When were you in Devonshire?"

"Mr. Raikes took his leave in September," said the secretary; "about the time when Mr. Dwerrihouse disappeared."

"I never even heard that he had disappeared till I came back!"

"That must remain to be proved," said the chairman. "I shall at once put this matter in the hands of the police. In the meanwhile, Mr. Raikes, being myself a magistrate, and used to deal with these

cases, I advise you to offer no resistance; but to confess while confession may yet do you service. As for your accomplice. . . ."

The frightened wretch fell upon his knees.

"I had no accomplice!" he cried. "Only have mercy upon me—only spare my life, and I will confess all! I didn't mean to harm him—I didn't mean to hurt a hair of his head! Only have mercy upon me, and let me go!"

The chairman rose in his place, pale and agitated.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "what horrible mystery is this? What does it mean?"

"As sure as there is a God in heaven," said Jonathan Jelf, "it means that murder has been done."

"No—no—no!" shrieked Raikes, still upon his knees, and cowering like a beaten hound. "Not murder! No jury that ever sat could bring it in murder. I thought I had only stunned him—I never

meant to do more than stun him! Manslaughter—manslaughter—not murder!"

Overcome by the horror of this unexpected revelation, the chairman covered his face with his hand, and for a moment or two remained silent.

"Miserable man," he said at length, "you have betrayed yourself."

"You bade me confess! You urged me to throw myself upon the mercy of the board!"

"You have confessed to a crime which no one suspected you of having committed," replied the chairman, "and which this board has no power either to punish or forgive. All that I can do for you is to advise you to submit to the law, to plead guilty, and to conceal nothing. When did you do this deed?"

The guilty man rose to his feet, and leaned heavily against the table. His answer came reluctantly, like the speech of one dreaming.

"On the twenty-second of September!"

On the twenty-second of September! I looked in Jonathan Jelf's face, and he in mine. I felt my own paling with a strange sense of wonder and dread. I saw his blench suddenly, even to the lips.

"Merciful heaven!" he whispered, "*what was It, then, that you saw in the train?*"

What was it that I saw in the train? That question remains unanswered to this day. I have never been able to reply to it. I only know that it bore the living likeness of the murdered man, whose body had been lying some ten weeks under a rough pile of branches, and brambles, and rotting leaves, at the bottom of a deserted chalk-pit about half way between Blackwater and Mallingford. I know that it spoke, and moved, and looked as that man spoke, and moved, and looked in life; that I heard, or seemed to hear, things related which I could never otherwise have learned; that I was guided, as

it were, by that vision on the platform to the identification of the murderer; and that, a passive instrument myself, I was destined, by means of these mysterious teachings, to bring about the ends of justice. For these things I have never been able to account.

As for that matter of the cigar-case, it proved, on inquiry, that the carriage in which I travelled down that afternoon to Clayborough had not been in use for several weeks, and was, in point of fact, the same in which poor John Dwerrihouse had performed his last journey. The case had, doubtless, been dropped by him, and had lain unnoticed till I found it.

Upon the details of the murder I have no need to dwell. Those who desire more ample particulars may find them, and the written confession of Augustus Raikes, in the files of the "Times" for 1856. Enough that the under-secretary, knowing the history of the new line, and following the negotiation step by step through all its

stages, determined to waylay Mr. Dwerrihouse, rob him of the seventy-five thousand pounds, and escape to America with his booty.

In order to effect these ends he obtained leave of absence a few days before the time appointed for the payment of the money; secured his passage across the Atlantic in a steamer advertised to start on the twenty-third; provided himself with a heavily-loaded "life-preserver," and went down to Blackwater to await the arrival of his victim. How he met him on the platform with a pretended message from the board; how he offered to conduct him by a short cut across the fields to Mallingford; how, having brought him to a lonely place, he struck him down with the life-preserver, and so killed him; and how, finding what he had done, he dragged the body to the verge of an out-of-the-way chalk-pit, and there flung it in, and piled it over with branches and brambles, are facts still fresh in the

SISTER JOHANNA'S STORY.

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IF you have ever heard of the Grödner Thal, then you will also have heard of the village of St. Ulrich, of which I, Johanna Rœderer, am a native. And if, as is more likely, you have never heard of either, then still, though without knowing it, many of you have, even from your earliest childhood, been familiar with the work by which, for many generations, we have lived and prospered. Your rocking-horse, your Noah's ark, your first doll, came from St. Ulrich—for the Grödner Thal is the children's paradise, and

supplies the little ones of all Europe with toys. In every house throughout the village—I might almost say in every house throughout the valley—you will find wood-carving, painting, or gilding perpetually going on; except only in the hay-making and harvest-time, when all the world goes up to the hills to mow and reap, and breathe the mountain air. Nor do our carvers carve only grotesque toys. All the crucifixes that you see by the wayside, all the carved stalls and tabernacles, all the painted and gilded saints decorating screens and side altars in our Tyrolean churches, are the work of their hands.

After what I have said, you will no doubt have guessed that ours was a family of wood-carvers. My father, who died when my sister and I were quite little children, was a wood-carver. My mother was also a wood-carver, as were her mother and grandmother before her; and Katrine and I were of course brought up

by her to the same calling. But, as it was necessary that one should look after the home duties, and as Katrine was always more delicate than myself, I gradually came to work less and less at the business; till at last, what with cooking, washing, mending, making, spinning, gardening, and so forth, I almost left it off altogether. Nor did Katrine work very hard at it, either; for, being so delicate, and so pretty, and so much younger than myself, she came, of course, to be a great deal spoiled and to have her own way in everything. Besides, she grew tired, naturally, of cutting nothing but cocks, hens, dogs, cats, cows, and goats; which were all our mother had been taught to make, and, consequently, all she could teach to her children.

"If I could carve saints and angels, like Ulrich, next door," Katrine used sometimes to say; "or if I might invent new beasts out of my own head, or if I might cut caricature nutcrackers of the

Herr Pürger and Don Wian, I shouldn't care if I worked hard all day; but I hate the cocks and hens, and I hate the dogs and cats, and I hate all the birds and beasts that ever went into the ark—and I only wish they had all been drowned in the Deluge, and not one left for a pattern!"

And then she would fling her tools away, and dance about the room like a wild creature, and mimic the Herr Pürger, who was the great wholesale buyer of all our St. Ulrich ware, till even our mother, grave and sober woman as she was, could not help laughing, till the tears ran down her cheeks.

Now the Ulrich next door, of whom our little Katrine used to speak, was the elder of two brothers named Finazzer, and he lived in the house adjoining our own; for at St. Ulrich, as in some of the neighbouring villages, one frequently sees two houses built together under one roof, with gardens and orchards surrounded by a common fence. Such a house was the

Finazzer's and ours; or I should rather say both houses were theirs, for they were our landlords, and we rented our cottage from them by the year.

Ulrich, named after the patron saint of our village, was a tall, brown, stalwart man, very grave, very reserved, very religious, and the finest wood-sculptor in all the Grödner Thal. No Madonnas, no angels, could compare with his for heavenly grace and tenderness; and as for his Christs, a great foreign critic who came to St. Ulrich some ten or twelve years ago said that no other modern artist with whose works he was acquainted could treat that subject with anything like the same dignity and pathos. But then, perhaps, no other modern artist went to his work in the same spirit, or threw into it, not only the whole force of a very noble and upright character, but all the loftiest aspirations of a profoundly religious nature.

His younger brother, Alois, was a painter—fair-haired, light-hearted, plea-

sure-loving; as unlike Ulrich, both in appearance and disposition, as it is possible to conceive. At the time of which I am telling you, he was a student in Venice and had already been three years away from home. I used to dream dreams, and weave foolish romances about Alois and my little Katrine, picturing to myself how he would some day come home, in the flush, perhaps, of his first success, and finding her so beautiful and a woman grown, fall in love with her at first sight, and she with him; and the thought of this possibility became at last such a happy certainty in my mind, that when things began to work round in quite the other way, I could not bring myself to believe it. Yet so it was, and, much as I loved my darling, and quick-sighted as I had always been in everything that could possibly concern her, there was not a gossip in St. Ulrich who did not see what was coming before I even suspected it.

When, therefore, my little Katrine came to me one evening in the orchard and told me, half laughing, half crying, that Ulrich Finazzer had that day asked her to be his wife, I was utterly taken by surprise.

"I never dreamed that he would think of me, dear," she said, with her head upon my bosom. "He is so much too good and too clever for such a foolish birdie as poor little Katrine."

"But—but my birdie loves him?" I said, kissing her bright hair.

She half lifted her head, half laughed through her tears, and said with some hesitation :—

"Oh, yes, I love him. I—I think I love him—and then I am quite sure he loves me, and that is more than enough."

"But, Katrine——"

She kissed me, to stop the words upon my lips.

"But you know quite well, dear, that I never could love any lover half as much

as I love you; and he knows it, too, for I told him so just now, and now please don't look grave, for I want to be very happy to-night, and I can't bear it."

And I also wanted her to be very happy, so I said all the loving things I could think of, and when we went in to supper we found Ulrich Finazzer waiting for us.

"Dear Johanna," he said, taking me by both hands, "you are to be my sister now."

And then he kissed me on the forehead. The words were few; but he had never spoken to me or looked at me so kindly before, and somehow my heart seemed to come into my throat, and I could not answer a word.

It was now the early summer time, and they were to be married in the autumn. Ulrich, meanwhile, had his hands full of work, as usual, and there was, besides, one important task which he wanted to complete before his wedding. This task

was a Christ, larger than life, which he designed as a gift to our parish church, then undergoing complete restoration. The committee of management had invited him in the first instance to undertake the work as an order, but Ulrich would not accept a price for it. He preferred to give it as a free-will offering, and he meant it to be the best piece of wood-sculpture that had ever yet left his hand. He had made innumerable designs for it both in clay and on paper, and separate studies from life for the limbs, hands, and feet. In short, it was to be no ordinary piece of mere conventional Grödner Thal work, but a work of art in the true sense of the word. In the meanwhile, he allowed no one to see the figure in progress—not even Katrine; but worked upon it with closed doors, and kept it covered with a linen cloth whenever his workshop was open.

So the Summer time wore on, and the roses bloomed abundantly in our little gar-

den, and the corn yellowed slowly on the hill-sides, and the wild white strawberry-blossoms turned to tiny strawberries, ruby-red, on every mossy bank among the fir-forests of the Seisser Alp. And still Ulrich laboured on at his great work, and sculptured many a gracious saint besides; and still the one object of his earthly worship was our little laughing Katrine.

Whether it was that, being so grave himself, and she so gay, he loved her the better for the contrast, I cannot tell; but his affection for her seemed to deepen daily. I watched it as one might watch the growth of some rare flower, and I wondered sometimes if she prized it as she ought. Yet I scarcely know how, child that she was, she should ever have risen to the heights or sounded the depths of such a nature as his. That she could not appreciate him, however, would have mattered little, if she had loved him more. There was the pity of it. She

had accepted him, as many a very young girl accepts her first lover, simply because he was her first. She was proud of his genius—proud of his preference—proud of the house, and the lands, and the worldly goods that were soon to be hers; but for that far greater wealth of love, she held it all too lightly.

Seeing this day after day, with the knowledge that nothing I could say would make things better, I fell, without being conscious of it, into a sad and silent way that arose solely out of my deep love for them both, and had no root of selfishness in it, as my own heart told me then, and tells me to this day.

In the midst of this time, so full of happiness for Ulrich, so full of anxiety for me, Alois Finazzer came home suddenly. We had been expecting him in a vague way ever since the Spring, but the surprise when he walked in unannounced was as great as if we had not expected him at all.

He kissed us all on both cheeks, and sat down as if he had not been away for a day.

"What a rich fellow I am!" he said, joyously. "I left only a grave elder brother behind when I went to Venice, and I come back finding two dear little sisters to welcome me home again."

And then he told us that he had just taken the gold medal at the Academy, that he had sold his prize-picture for two hundred florins, and that he had a pocketful of presents for us all—a necklace for Katrine, a spectacle-case for our mother, and a housewife for myself. When he put the necklace round my darling's neck he kissed her again, and praised her eyes, and said he should some day put his pretty little sister into one of his pictures.

He was greatly changed. He went away a curly-headed lad of eighteen; he came back a man, bearded and self-confident.

Three years, at certain turning-points

on the road of life, work with us more powerfully, whether for better or worse, than would ten years at any other period. I thought I liked Alois Finazzer better when he was those three years younger.

Not so Katrine, however—not so our mother—not so the St. Ulrich folk, all of whom were loud in his praise. Handsome, successful, gay, generous, he treated the men, laughed with the girls, and carried all before him.

As for Ulrich, he put his work aside, and cleared his brow, and made holiday for two whole days, going round with his brother from house to house, and telling everyone how Alois had taken the great gold medal in Venice. Proud and happy as he was, however, he was prouder and happier still when, some three or four days later, at a meeting of the Church Committee of management, the Commune formally invited Alois to paint an altar-piece for the altar of San Marco at the price of three hundred florins.

That evening Ulrich invited us to supper, and we drank Alois's health in a bottle of good Barbera wine. He was to stay at home now, instead of going back to Venice, and he was to have a large room at the back of Ulrich's workshop for a studio.

"I'll bring your patron saint into my picture if you will sit for her portrait, Katrine," said Alois, laughingly.

And Katrine blushed and said, "Yes;" and Ulrich was delighted; and Alois pulled out his pocket-book, and began sketching her head on the spot.

"Only you must try to think of serious things, and not laugh when you are sitting for a saint, my little Mädchen," said Ulrich, tenderly; whereupon Katrine blushed still more deeply, and Alois, without looking up from his drawing, promised that they would both be as grave as judges whenever the sittings were going on.

And now there began for me a period

of such misery that even at this distance of time I can scarcely bear to speak or think of it. There, day after day, was Alois painting in his new studio, and Katrine sitting to him for Santa Catarina, while Ulrich, unselfish, faithful, trustful, worked on in the next room, absorbed in his art, and not only unconscious of treachery, but incapable of conceiving it as a possibility. How I tried to watch over her, and would fain have watched over her still more closely if I could, is known to myself alone. My object was to be with her throughout all those fatal sittings; Alois's object was to make the appointments for hours when my household duties compelled me to remain at home. He soon found out that my eyes were opened. From that moment it was a silent, unacknowledged fight between us, and we were always fighting it.

And now, as his work drew nearer to completion, Ulrich seemed every day to live less for the people and things about

him, and more for his art. Always somewhat over-silent and reserved, he now seemed scarcely conscious, at times, of even the presence of others. He spoke and moved as in a dream; went to early mass every morning at four; fasted three days out of seven; and, having wrought himself up to a certain pitch of religious and artistic excitement, lived in a world of his own creation, from which even Katrine was for the time excluded. Things being thus, what could I do but hold my peace? To speak to Ulrich would have been impossible at any time; to speak to my darling (she being, perhaps, wholly unconscious) might be to create the very peril I dreaded; to appeal to Alois, I felt beforehand, would be worse than useless. So I kept my trouble to myself, and prayed that the weeks might pass quickly, and bring their wedding-day.

Now, just about this time of which I am telling (that is towards the middle

of August) came round the great annual fête, or Sagro, as we call it, at Botzen; and to this fête Katrine and I had for some years been in the habit of going—walking to Atzwang the first day by way of Castelruth; sleeping near Atzwang in the house of our aunt, Maria Bernhard, whose husband kept the Gasthaus called the Schwarzen Adler; taking the railway next morning from Atzwang to Botzen, and there spending the day of the Sagro; and returning in the same order as we came. This year, however, having the dread of Alois before my eyes, and knowing that Ulrich would not leave his work, I set my face against the Botzen expedition, and begged my little sister, since she could not have the protection of her betrothed husband, to give it up. And so I think she would have done at first, but that Alois was resolute to have us go; and at last even Ulrich urged it upon us, saying that he would not have his

little Mädchen balked of her festa simply because he was too busy to take her there himself. Would not Johanna be there to take care of her, Alois to take care of them both? So my protest was silenced, and we went.

It is a long day's walk from St. Ulrich to Atzwang, and we did not reach our aunt's house till nearly supper-time; so that it was quite late before we went up to our room. And now my darling, after being in wild spirits all day, became suddenly silent, and instead of going to bed, stayed by the window, looking at the moon.

"What is my birdie thinking of?" I said, putting my arm about her waist.

"I am thinking," she said, softly, "how the moon is shining now at St. Ulrich on our mother's bedroom window, and on our father's grave."

And with this she laid her head down upon my shoulder, and cried as if her heart would break.

I have reproached myself since for letting that moment pass as I did. I believe I might have had her confidence if I had tried, and then what a world of sorrow might have been averted from us all!

We reached Botzen next morning in time for the six o'clock mass; went to high mass again at nine; and strolled among the booths between the services. Here Alois, as usual, was very free with his money, buying ribbons and trinkets for Katrine, and behaving in every way as if he, and not Ulrich, were her acknowledged lover. At eleven, having met some of our St. Ulrich neighbours, we made a party and dined all together at a Gasthaus in the Silbergasse; and after dinner the young men proposed to take us to see an exhibition of rope-dancers and tumblers. Now I knew that Ulrich would not approve of this, and I entreated my darling for his sake, if not for mine, to stay away. But she would not listen to me.

"Ulrich, Ulrich!" she repeated, pettishly. "Don't tease me about Ulrich; I am tired of his very name!"

The next moment she had taken Alois's arm, and we were in the midst of the crowd.

Finding she would go, I of course went also, though sorely against my inclination; and one of our St. Ulrich friends gave me his arm, and got me through. The crowd, however, was so great that I lost sight somehow of Alois and Katrine, and found myself landed presently inside the booth and sitting on a front seat next to the orchestra, alone with the St. Ulrich people. We kept seats for them as long as we could, and stood upon the bench to look for them, till at last the curtain rose, and we had to sit down without them.

I saw nothing of the performance. To this day I have no idea how long it lasted, or what it consisted of. I remember nothing but the anxiety with which I kept

looking towards the door, and the deadly sinking at my heart as the minutes dragged by. To go in search of them was impossible, for the entrance was choked, and there was no standing-room in any part of the booth, so that even when the curtain fell we were fully another ten minutes getting out.

You have guessed it, perhaps, before I tell you. They were not in the market-place; they were not at the Gasthaus; they were not in the Cathedral.

"The tall young man in a grey and green coat, and the pretty girl with a white rose in her hair?" said a bystander. "Tush, my dear, don't be uneasy. They are gone home; I saw them running towards the station more than half an hour ago."

So we flew to the station, and there one of the porters, who was an Atzwang man and knew us both, confirmed the dreadful truth. They were gone indeed, but they were not gone home. Just in time to catch the Express, they had taken

their tickets through to Venice, and were at this moment speeding southwards.

How I got home—not stopping at all at Atzwang, but going straight away on foot in the broiling afternoon sun—never resting till I reached Castelruth, a little after dusk—lying down outside my bed and sobbing all the night—getting up at the first glimmer of grey dawn and going on again before the sun was up—how I did all this, faint for want of food, yet unable to eat; weary for want of rest, yet unable to sleep—I know not. But I did it, and was home again at St. Ulrich, kneeling beside our mother's chair, and comforting her as best I could, by seven.

"How is Ulrich to be told?"

It was her first question. It was the question I had been asking myself all the way home. I knew well, however, that I must be the one to break it to him. It was a terrible task, and I put it from me as long as possible.

When at last I did go, it was

past mid-day. The workshop door stood open—the Christ, just showing a vague outline through the folds, was covered with a sheet, and standing up against the wall — and Ulrich was working on the drapery of a St. Francis, the splinters from which were flying off rapidly in every direction.

Seeing me on the threshold, he looked up and smiled.

"So soon back, liebe Johanna?" he said. "We did not expect you till evening."

Then, finding I made no answer, he paused in his work, and said, quickly:—

"What is the matter? Is she ill?"

I shook my head.

"No," I said, "she is not ill."

"Where is she, then?"

"She is not ill," I said, again, "but—she is not here."

And then I told him.

He heard me out in dead silence, never moving so much as a finger, only growing whiter as I went on. Then, when I had

done, he went over to the window, and remained standing with his back towards me for some minutes.

"And you?" he said, presently, still without turning his head. "And you—through all these weeks—you never saw or suspected anything?"

"I feared—I was not sure—"

He turned upon me with a terrible pale anger in his face.

"You feared—you were not sure!" he said, slowly. "That is to say, you saw it going on, and let it go on, and would not put out your hand to save us all! False! false! false!—all false together—false love, false brother, false friend!"

"You are not just to me, Ulrich," I said; for to be called false by him was more than I could bear.

"Am I not just? Then I pray that God will be more just to you, and to them, than I can ever be; and that His justice may be the justice of vengeance—swift, and terrible, and without mercy."

And saying this he laid his hand on the veiled Christ, and cursed us all three with a terrible, passionate curse, like the curse of a prophet of old.

For one moment my heart stood still, and I felt as if there was nothing left for me but to die—but it was only for that one moment; for I knew, even before he had done speaking, that no words of his could harm either my poor little erring Katrine or myself. And then, having said so as gently as I could, I formally forgave him in her name and mine, and went away.

That night Ulrich Finazzer shut up his house and disappeared, no one knew whither. When I questioned the old woman who lived with him as servant, she said that he had paid and dismissed her a little before dusk; that she then thought he was looking very ill, and that she had observed how, instead of being as usual hard at work all day in the workshop, he had fetched his gun out of

the kitchen about two o'clock, and carried it up to his bedroom, where, she believed, he had spent nearly all the afternoon cleaning it. This was all she had to tell; but it was more than enough to add to the burden of my terrors.

Oh, the weary, weary time that followed —the long, sad, solitary days—the days that became weeks—the weeks that became months—the Autumn that chilled and paled as it wore on towards Winter—the changing wood—the withering leaves —the snow that whitened daily on the great peaks round about! Thus September and October passed away, and the last of the harvest was gathered in, and November came with bitter winds and rain; and save a few hurried lines from Katrine, posted in Perugia, I knew nothing of the fate of all whom I had loved and lost.

"We were married," she wrote, "in Venice, and Alois talks of spending the Winter in Rome. I should be perfectly

happy if I knew that you and Ulrich had forgiven us."

This was all. She gave me no address; but I wrote to her at the Poste Restante, Perugia, and again to the Poste Restante, Rome; both of which letters, I presume, lay unclaimed till destroyed by the authorities, for she never replied to either.

And now the Winter came on in earnest, as Winter always comes in our high valleys, and Christmas-time drew round again; and on the eve of St. Thomas, Ulrich Finazzer returned to his house as suddenly and silently as he had left it.

Next door neighbours as we were, we should not have known of his return but for the trampled snow upon the path, and the smoke going up from the workshop chimney. No other sign of life or occupation was to be seen. The shutters remained unopened. The doors, both front and back, remained fast locked. If any neighbour knocked, he was left to knock unanswered. Even the old woman

who used to be his servant, was turned away by a stern voice from within, bidding her begone and leave him at peace.

That he was at work was certain; for we could hear him in the workshop by night as well as by day. But he could work there as in a tomb, for the room was lighted by a window in the roof.

Thus St. Thomas's Day, and the next day which was the fourth Sunday in Advent, went by; and still he who had ever been so constant at mass showed no sign of coming out amongst us. On Monday our good curé walked down, all through the fresh snow (for there had been a heavy fall in the night), on purpose to ask if we were sure that Ulrich was really in his house; if we had yet seen him; and if we knew what he did for food, being shut in there quite alone. But to these questions we could give no satisfactory reply.

That day when we had dined, I put some bread and meat in a basket and

left it at his door; but it lay there untouched all through the day and night, and in the morning I fetched it back again, with the food still in it.

This was the fourth day since his return. It was very dreadful—I cannot tell you how dreadful—to know that he was so near, yet never even to see his shadow on a blind. As the day wore on my suspense became intolerable. To-night, I told myself, would be Christmas Eve; to-morrow Christmas Day. Was it possible that his heart would not soften if he remembered our Happy Christmas of only last year, when he and Katrine were not yet betrothed; how he supped with us, and how we all roasted nuts upon the hearth and sang part-songs after supper? Then, again, it seemed incredible that he should not go to church on Christmas Day.

Thus the day went by, and the evening dusk came on, and the village choir

came round singing carols from house to house, and still he made no sign.

Now what with the suspense of knowing him to be so near, and the thought of my little Katrine far away in Rome, and the remembrance of how he—he whom I had honoured and admired above all the world my whole life long—had called down curses on us both the very last time that he and I stood face to face—what with all this, I say, and what with the season and its associations, I had such a great restlessness and anguish upon me that I sat up trying to read my Bible long after mother had gone to bed. But my thoughts wandered continually from the text, and at last the restlessness so gained upon me that I could sit still no longer, and so got up and walked about the room.

And now suddenly, while I was pacing to and fro, I heard, or fancied I heard, a voice in the garden calling to me by name. I stopped—I listened—I trembled. My

very heart stood still! Then, hearing no more, I opened the window and outer shutters, and instantly there rushed in a torrent of icy cold air and a flood of brilliant moonlight, and there, on the shining snow below, stood Ulrich Finazzer.

Himself, and yet so changed! Worn, haggard, grey.

I saw him, I tell you, as plainly as I see my own hand at this moment. He was standing close, quite close, under the window, with the moonlight full upon him.

"Ulrich!" I said, and my own voice sounded strange to me, somehow, in the dead waste and silence of the night—"Ulrich, are you come to tell me we are friends again?"

But instead of answering me he pointed to a mark on his forehead—a small dark mark, that looked at this distance and by this light like a bruise—cried aloud with a strange wild cry, less like a human voice than a far-off echo, "The brand of

Cain! The brand of Cain!" and so flung up his arms with a despairing gesture, and fled away into the night.

The rest of my story may be told in a few words—the fewer the better. Insane with the desire of vengeance, Ulrich Finazzer had tracked the fugitives from place to place, and slain his brother at mid-day in the streets of Rome. He escaped unmolested, and was well nigh over the Austrian border before. the authorities began to inquire into the particulars of the murder. He then, as was proved by a comparison of dates, must have come straight home by way of Mantua, Verona, and Botzen, with no other object, apparently, than to finish the statue that he had designed for an offering to the church. He worked upon it, accordingly, as I have said, for four days and nights incessantly, completed it to the last degree of finish, and then, being in who can tell how terrible a con-

dition of remorse, and horror, and despair, sought to expiate his crime with his blood. They found him shot through the head by his own hand, lying quite dead at the feet of the statue upon which he had been working, probably, up to the last moment; his tools lying close by; the pistol still fast in his clenched hand, and the divine pitying face of the Redeemer whose law he had outraged, bending over him as if in sorrow and forgiveness.

Our mother has now been dead some years; strangers occupy the house in which Ulrich Finazzer came to his dreadful death; and already the double tragedy is almost forgotten. In the sad, faded woman, prematurely grey, who lives with me, ever working silently, steadily, patiently, from morning till night at our hereditary trade, few who had known her in the freshness of her youth would now recognise my beautiful Katrine. Thus from day to day, from year to year, we journey on together, nearing the end.

Did I indeed see Ulrich Finazzer that night of his self-murder? If I did so with my bodily eyes and it was no illusion of the senses, then most surely I saw him not in life, for that dark mark which looked to me in the moonlight like a bruise was the bullet-hole in his brow.

But did I see him? It is a question I ask myself again and again, and have asked myself for years. Ah! who can answer it?

ALL-SAINTS' EVE.

A STORY OF CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

[This story, written some seventeen or eighteen years ago, was founded, to the best of my recollection, on the particulars of a French trial that I read in some old volume of *Causes Celèbres*, or *Causes Judiciaires*, the title of which I have now forgotten. I no longer remember how much of it is fact, or how much fiction; or even whether the names and dates are retained unaltered.]

ALL-SAINTS' EVE.

CHAPTER I.

THE MOUNTAINEERS.

IT was a sultry day in the month of August, A.D. 1710. The place was wild and solitary enough—a narrow ledge of rock jutting out from a precipitous mountain-side in the department of the Haute Auvergne. The mountain was volcanic—bare and blackened towards the west; grassy to the east and south; clothed with thick chestnut-woods about the base. A sea of dusky peaks stretched all around. The deep blue

sky burned overhead. All was repose; all was silence—silence in the grass, in the air, on the mountain-side.

Upon this shelf of rock lay three men, sound asleep; with their heads in the shade, their feet in the sun, and the remains of a brown loaf and a big cheese lying beside them on the grass.

The air up here was as still to-day, and as languid, as down in the green valleys below. Towards the south, a faint white mist dulled the distance; but in the direction of Clermont, on the north, every summit rose clear and keen against the sky. Most conspicuous amongst these was the long toothed-ridge of the Mont Dor; and loftiest of all, though apparently farthest, the solitary summit of the Puy de Dome. Here and there a few scattered sheep or cows might be seen as mere moving specks on some green slope of high level pasture. Now and then, the faint

bleating of a stray lamb, or the bark of a herdsman's dog, or the piping of some distant shepherd boy "piping as though he should never grow old," just stirred the silence. But for these vague sounds and the low humming of insects in the grass, all was so profoundly still that it seemed as if Nature herself were holding her breath, and as if the very perfumes were asleep in the hearts of the wild flowers.

Suddenly, in the midst of this charmed silence, the prolonged blast of a huntsman's horn, and the deep baying of many hounds, came sweeping up the ravine below. The sleepers sprang to their feet, rubbed their eyes, and peered over the brink of the precipice.

"'Tis Madame la Comtesse out with the hounds!" said the elder of the three—a big, burly, sun-browned mountaineer of some fifty-five or sixty years of age.

"*Peste!* It is my luck never to be

in the way when she rides!" exclaimed one of the two younger herdsmen. "Here is the third time our new mistress has hunted of late, and I have never yet seen her."

The horns rang out again, but this time farther away and more faintly. Once more, and it was but a breath upon the breeze. Then all was silent as before.

"They have gone round by the Gorge des Loups," said the elder of the trio.

Then, looking round the horizon, he added:—

"There is a storm brewing somewhere—and the shadows are lengthening. 'Tis time we went down to the Buron, lads, and saw to the milking."

Now these three constituted the usual triumvirate of the Haute Auvergne—the *vacher*, or cowkeeper, (sometimes called the *buronnier*) who makes the cheeses which form the principal revenue of the landowners in this part of France;

the *boutilier* who makes the butter; and the *pâtre*, or herdsman, who looks after the cows, and keeps the Buron and dairy in order. The distinctions of rank among these three are strictly observed.

The *vacher* is a person of authority, "a wise fellow, and, what is more, an officer;" the *boutilier* comes next in dignity; and the *pâtre* is under both. The Buron, or little wooden hut, in which they live during the six Summer months, in Switzerland would be called a châlet. It is generally built of wood, and divided into three chambers, the first of which is for living and cooking in, and is provided with a rude fire-place and chimney; the second is for the cheese-making, and contains milk-pails, churns, and other implements; the third serves for a cheese-room, store-room, and sleeping-room. A small kitchen-garden, a stable, a pig-sty, and an enclosure in which the cattle

take refuge in rough weather, completes the establishment.

The Buron to which the three herdsmen now took their way stood on a green slope surrounded by oaks, about six hundred feet below the spot on which they had been sleeping. As they went along, the cows came to their call and followed them, knowing that milking-time was come. Every cow—and there were fifty in all—was branded on the flank with a coronet and an initial P, thus showing them to be the property of the Countess de Peyrelade, a young and wealthy widow whose estates extended for many miles to the eastward of the Plomb de Cantal. Other herds, other Burons, other dependents, she had scattered about the neighbouring hillsides, all portioned off in the same way—namely, fifty cows and three men to each district.

"Tell us, Père Jacques," said the *boutilier* when, the milking being done,

the men sat outside the Buron door, smoking and chatting, "tell us what our new lady is like."

"Like!" repeated the cowkeeper. "Eh, *mon garçon*, it would take a more skilful tongue than mine to describe her! She is more beautiful than the Madonna in the Cathedral of St. Flour."

"When did you see her, Père Jacques, and where?" asked the *pâtre*.

"*Mon enfant*, I have seen her from near by and from afar off. I have seen her as a child, a demoiselle, a bride, a widow. I have carried her in my arms, and danced her on my knee, many and many a time. Ah! that surprises you; but the snow has fallen for many a Winter on the summit of Mount Cantal since that time."

"Then it was a great many years ago, Father Jaques. How old is Madame la Comtesse?"

"Twenty-five years at the most, come September," replied Jacques. "And she's so fresh and beautiful that she does not

yet look above eighteen. We always used to call her the little Queen Marguerite; and sure, if a young girl were to be made a queen for her beauty, Marguerite would have been crowned ten years ago. Ah, when she married the old Comte de Peyrelade and went away to the King's court, there was not a soul in the province but missed her. It was a blessing even to look upon her; she was so fair, so smiling, so gracious! From everybody you heard, 'Well, have you been told the news? The little Queen Marguerite is gone!' And all the men sighed, and the woman cried; and it was a sad day for the poor folks. Well, nine years have gone by since then. She has at last come back to us; the old Count is dead; and our little Queen will live with us once more, till the end of her days!"

"Perhaps," said the *boutilier*, who had hitherto been silent.

"Why perhaps?" said Père Jacques, knitting his grey brows, "why perhaps?"

"Is not Madame young and beautiful?" asked the *boutilier*. "Is she not rich? Why, then, should she bury herself for life in an old château? What will you bet that she does not go back to court before twelve months are over, and there marry some rich and handsome lord."

"Hush! Pierre," replied Jacques, in a moody voice; "I tell you she will neither marry nor leave us. She has made a vow to that effect."

"Do ladies keep those vows?" asked the incredulous Pierre.

"She will. Listen, and I will tell you all that passed nine years ago in the Château de Pradines, the home of our little Queen Marguerite before her marriage."

The two lads drew nearer, and the cow-keeper thus began:—

"The handsomest and noblest among all Marguerite's lovers was M. le Chevalier de Fontane. She preferred him; and though he was but a younger son, with a

lieutenant's commission, the old Baron de Pradines consented to the marriage for love of his daughter. The wedding-day was fixed. Then news came that Monsieur George, the brother of Mademoiselle Marguerite, was to have leave of absence from his regiment; and M. le Baron deferred the marriage till his arrival—and sorely he repented of it afterwards! Monsieur George was as much disliked as his father and sister were beloved in the province; and the day when he had first left it was a day of rejoicing amongst us. It was late one evening when he arrived at the château, bringing with him an old gentleman. This gentleman was the Count de Peyrelade. As soon as supper was over, Monsieur George went to his father's chamber, and there remained with him for a long time in conversation. No one ever knew what passed between them; but the night was far spent when he came out, and the next day M. le Baron, who had been full of life

and health before the arrival of his son, was confined to his bed in the extremity of illness. A priest was sent for, and the last sacraments were administered; and then the poor old gentleman summoned all the household to take his farewell.

"'Marguerite,' said he to his daughter, who was crying bitterly—'Marguerite, I have but a few moments to live, and before I leave thee I have a prayer to address to thee.' And as Mademoiselle kissed his hands without being able to speak a word, he added, 'My daughter, promise me to marry M. de Peyrelade!'

"At these words the poor young lady gave a great cry, and fell on her knees at the foot of her father's bed. Then the Baron turned to the late Count:—

"'Monsieur,' said he, 'I know my daughter: she will obey my commands. Promise me to make her happy.'

"The Count, greatly moved, promised to devote his life to her; and the poor dear master fell back quite dead!

"It was exactly twenty-four hours after his son's arrival that M. le Baron breathed his last. What a terrible night it was, boys! The rain and snow had never ceased falling since that fatal return. M. le Chevalier de Fontane, who knew nothing of what had passed, came riding into the courtyard about an hour after the Baron had died. I ran out to him, for I was a stable-man in the château, and I told him all that had happened. As he listened to me, he became as pale as a corpse, and I saw him reel in his saddle. Then he plunged his spurs into his horse's flanks, and fled away like a madman into the storm. From that time he was never seen or heard of again; but, as he took the road to the mountains, it was supposed that he fell, with his horse, into some chasm, and was buried in the snow. Every year, on the anniversary of that day, his family have a mass said for the repose of his soul."

Here the cowkeeper crossed himself

devoutly, and his companions followed his example.

After a few minutes' silence, "Well, Pierre," he said, "now do you understand why Madame la Comtesse de Peyrelade has retired at the age of twenty-five to live in a ruinous old Château of Auvergne, and why she should never marry a second time?"

The *boutilier* was so concerned that he had not the heart to say a word; but the herdsman, who was excessively curious, returned to the charge.

"You have not told us, Père Jacques," said he, "why the Baron desired his daughter to marry the late Count instead of the Chevalier de Fontane."

"I can only tell you the reports," replied Jacques; "for nobody knows the truth of it. They said that M. George owed more money to the Count de Peyrelade than his father could pay, and that he had sold the hand of his sister to defray the debt. Every one

knows that the Count was very much in love with her, and that she had refused him several times already."

"Alas!" exclaimed Pierre, "I don't wonder at the poor lady's determination. It is not her old husband that she grieves for, but her father and her lover; is it not, Père Jacques?"

"Ay," replied the cowkeeper, "and it is not only past troubles that the gentle soul has to bear, but present troubles also! 'Tis not much peace, I fear, that she will find in Auvergne."

"Why so, friend?" said a deep voice behind the speakers, and a man of about thirty-eight or forty years of age, with a pale face, a stooping figure, and a melancholy expression of countenance came suddenly into the midst of them. The mountaineer and the ecclesiastic were oddly combined in his attire; for with the cassock and band he wore leathern gaiters, a powder-pouch and a cartridge-box; while across his shoulders was slung

a double-barrelled musket. A *couteau de chasse* was thrust in his leathern belt, and a magnificent mountain-dog walked leisurely at his side.

"Good day, Monsieur le Curé," said the cowkeeper, respectfully. "Welcome to the Buron. Have you had good sport?"

"Not very, my good friend, not very," replied the priest.

"You are tired, Monsieur le Curé; come and rest awhile in the Buron. We can give you fresh milk and bread, and new cheese. Ah *dame!* you will not find such refreshments here as at the château, but they are heartily at your service."

"I will sit here with you, friends, and willingly accept a draught of milk," said the priest, as he took his place beside them on the grass; "but upon one condition; namely, that you will continue the subject of your conversation as freely as if I were not amongst you."

Père Jacques was abashed and con-

founded. He looked uneasily to the right, and then to the left; and at last, having no other resource, "*Eh bien!*" he exclaimed, "I will e'en speak the truth, Monsieur le Curé, because it is wicked to tell a lie, and because you are a holy man and will not be offended with me. We were talking of Madame and M. George, the present Baron de Pradines. He is actually living here in the château, and here he is going to remain—M. George, the spendthrift brother of Madame, to whom, through your intercession, Monsieur le Curé, she is lately reconciled."

"Hush! Jacques," said the priest, gravely. "M. de Pradines was wild in his youth; but he has repented. It was he who made the first advances towards a reconciliation with Madame."

"I know that, M. le Curé," said the mountaineer, "I know that; but the Baron is poor, and knows how to look after his own interests. He is here for no good,

and no good will come of his return. It is certain that the old well in the courtyard of the château, which was dry for years, has refilled these last few days; and you know *that* to be a sure sign of some misfortune to the family."

"It is true," said the Curé superstitiously, "it is true, Jacques."

And he grew thoughtful.

The mountaineers were silent; suddenly the priest's dog started and pricked up his ears. At the same moment the report of a gun echoed through the glen, and a white partridge, such as is sometimes to be seen in the mountains after a severe Winter, fell fluttering at the feet of the Curé. Then followed a crashing of underwood and a sound of rapid footsteps, and in another moment a gentleman appeared, parting the bushes and escorting a young lady who held the train of her hunting-habit thrown across her arm. The gentleman was laughing loudly, but the lady looked pale and distressed, and

running towards the group under the chestnut-trees, took up the wounded bird and kissed it tenderly, exclaiming :—

"Ah, M. le Curé, *you* would not have killed the pretty creature if I had begged its life, would you?"

The priest coloured crimson.

"Madame," said he, falteringly, "this partridge is wounded in the wing, but is not dead. Who shot it?"

The young lady looked reproachfully at the gentleman; the gentleman shrugged his shoulders and laughed again, but less heartily than before.

"Oh, *mea culpa!*" he said, lightly. "I am the culprit, Monsieur l'Abbé."

CHAPTER II.

THE STORM.

THE Baron de Pradines, late of the Royal Musketeers and now captain in the Auvergne Dragoons, was small and fair, like his sister, and about thirty-five years of age. He looked, however, some years older, pale, *ennuyé*, and languid—as might be expected in a man who had spent a dissipated youth in the gayest court of Europe.

Madame de Peyrelade, on the contrary, was scarcely changed since Jacques had last seen her. She was then sixteen; she was now five-and-twenty; and, save in a more melancholy expression, a sadder

smile, and a bearing more dignified and self-possessed, the good herdsman told himself that nine years had left no trace of their flight over the head of "*la belle Marguerite.*" The Countess, being still in mourning, wore a riding-dress of grey cloth ornamented with black velvet, with a hat and plume of the same colours. Thus attired, she so strongly resembled the portraits of her namesake, the beautiful Marguerite de Navarre, that one might almost have fancied she had just stepped out of the canvas upon that wild precipice amidst a group of still wilder mountaineers, such as Salvator loved to paint.

There were some minutes of uneasy silence. The wondering herdsmen had retreated into a little knot; the captain bit his glove, and glanced at his sister under his eyelashes; the Countess tapped her little foot impatiently upon the ground; and the Curé of St. Saturnin, with an awkward assumption of indiffer-

ence, bent his sallow face over the wounded partridge, which was nestled within the folds of his black serge cassock.

"*Mordieu!* sister," exclaimed the Baron, with his unpleasant laugh, "are we all struck dumb at this woeful catastrophe—this woodland tragedy? Being the culprit, I am, however, ready to throw myself at your feet. You prayed to me for mercy just now, for a white partridge, and I denied it. I now entreat it for myself, having offended you."

The Countess, smiling somewhat sadly, held out her hand, which the dragoon kissed with an air of profound respect.

"George," she said, "I am foolishly superstitious about these white partridges. A person who was very dear to me gave me once upon a time a white partridge. One day it escaped. Was it an evil omen? I know not; but I never saw that person again."

The young man frowned impatiently, and, changing the conversation, exclaimed, with a disdainful movement of the head:—

"We have the honour, Madame, to be the object of your herdsmens' curiosity all this time. The fellows, I should imagine, would be more fitly occupied among their cows. Or is it the custom on your estates, my amiable sister, that these people should pass their time in idleness. A word to the steward would not, methinks, be altogether out of place on this subject."

The herdsmen shrank back at these words, which, though uttered in the purest French of Versailles, were sufficiently intelligible to their ears; but the Countess, with a kindly smile, and a quick glance towards the priest, undertook their defence.

It was holiday, she said, doubtless in consequence of his own arrival in Auvergne; and besides, did he not see that

M. the good Curé has been delivering to them some pious exhortation, as was his wont?

The priest blushed and bowed, and mode an inward resolution of penance that same night, for participation in that innocent falsehood. It was his first sin against truth.

At this moment the lady, looking towards the little group of men, recognized Père Jacques.

"If I do not mistake," she exclaimed, making use of the mountain *patois*, "I see one of my oldest friends yonder—a herdsman who used to be in my father's service! Père Jacques, is it really you?"

The herdsman stepped forward eagerly.

"Ah, Mam'selle Marguerite," he stammered, "is it possible that—that you remember me?"

And he scarcely dared to touch with his lips the gloved hand that his mistress gave him to kiss.

"George," said the Countess, "do you not remember Père Jacques?"

"Ah!—yes," replied the Baron, carelessly; adding, half aloud, "my dear sister, do not let us stay here talking with these boors."

"Nay, brother, this place is not Versailles, *Dieu merci!* Let me talk a little with my old friend—he reminds me of the days when I was so happy."

"And so poor," muttered the dragoon between his teeth, as he turned away and began talking *chasse* with the Curé of St. Saturnin.

"And now tell me, Père Jacques," said the young Countess, seating herself at the foot of a chestnut-tree, "why have you left the château de Pradines?"

"You were there no longer, Madame," said the mountaineer, standing before her in a respectful attitude.

"But I was not here either."

"True; but Madame might, some day, grow weary of the court; and I knew that

sooner or later she would come to Auvergne. Besides, here I worked on Madame's property, and ate of her bread."

"Poor Père Jacques! you also think sometimes of the old days at Pradines?"

"Sometimes!—it seems as if it were but yesterday, Mam'selle, that I carried you in my arms, and ran beside you when you rode Fifine, the black pony, and heard your laugh in the court-yard and your foot in the garden! Ah, Madame, those were the happy times, when the hunt came round, and Monsieur your father, and yourself, and Monsieur the Chevalier de Fon——. Oh, pardon, Madame! pardon! —what have I said!"

And the herdsman stopped, terrified and remorseful; for at that name the lady had turned deathly white.

"Hush, my good friend," she said, falteringly, "It is nothing." Then, after a brief pause and a rapid glance towards her brother and the priest, "Come

nearer, Jacques," she said, in a subdued tone. "One word—*Was the body ever discovered?*"

"No, Madame."

She shaded her face with her hand, and so remained for some moments without speaking. She then resumed in a low voice:—

"A terrible death, Jacques! He must have fallen down some precipice."

"Alas! Madame, it may have been so."

"Do you remember the last day that we all hunted together at Pradines? The anniversary of that day comes round again to-morrow. Poor Eugène! . . . Take my purse, Père Jacques, and share its contents with your companions—but reserve a louis to purchase some masses for the repose of his soul. Say that they are for your friend and benefactor—for he was always good to you. He has often spoken of you to me. Will you promise me this, Père Jacques?"

The herdsman was yet assuring her of his obedience, when the priest and her brother came forward and interrupted them.

"My dear sister," said M. de Pradines, "the sun is fast going down, and we have but another hour of daylight. Our friend here, M. le Curé, apprehends a storm. It were best we rejoined our huntsmen, and began to return."

"A storm, *mon frère*," said Madame de Peyrelade with surprise. "Impossible! The sky is perfectly clear. Besides, it is so delightful under these old trees—I should like to remain a short time longer."

"It might be imprudent, Madame la Comtesse," said the Curé timidly, as he cast a hurried glance along the horizon. "Do you not see those light vapours about the summit of Mont Cantal, and that low bank of clouds behind the forest? I greatly mistake if we have not a heavy storm before an hour,

and I should counsel you to take the road for the château without delay."

"Come hither, Père Jacques," said the lady, smiling, "you used to be my oracle at Pradines. Will there be a storm to-night?"

The old mountaineer raised his head, and snuffed the breeze like a stag-hound.

"M. le Curé is right," he said. "The night-wind is rising, and there is a tempest close at hand. See the cows, how they are coming up the valley for shelter in the stalls! They know what this wind says."

"To horse! to horse!" cried the dragoon, as he raised his silver horn and blew a prolonged blast. "We have no time to lose; the roads are long and difficult."

A clear blast from the valley instantly echoed to his summons, and the next moment a group of men and dogs were seen hurrying up the slope.

"Farewell, my friends," said the Countess; "farewell, Père Jacques! M. le Curé, you will return and dine with us?"

"Madame, I thank you; but—but this is a fast-day with me."

"Well, to-morrow. You will come to-morrow? I will sing you some of those old songs you are so fond of! Say yes, M. le Curé."

"Madame la Comtesse will graciously excuse me. I must catechise the children of the district to-morrow."

"But my brother returns to-morrow to his regiment—you will come to bid him farewell?"

"Monsieur de Pradines has already accepted my good wishes and compliments."

"The day after to-morrow, then, M. le Curé?"

"Madame, I will endeavour."

"But you promise nothing. Ah, monsieur, for some time past you have been

very sparing of your visits. Have I offended you that you will no longer honour me with your company?"

"Offended me!—oh Madame!"

These words were uttered with an accent and an expression so peculiar that the young lady looked up in surprise, and saw that the priest's eyes were full of tears.

For a moment she was silent; then, affecting an air of gaiety, "Adieu, M. le Curé," she cried as she turned away; "be more neighbourly in future."

Then, seeing that he still held the wounded partridge, "Alas! that poor bird," she exclaimed; "it is trembling still!"

"Ah, Madame la Comtesse," said Père Jacques. "I'll engage that, if M. le Curé opened his hand, that cunning partridge would be a mile away in half a minute!"

"Do you think it will live? Well, Père Jacques, take care of it for my

sake. Feed it for two or three days, and then give the poor bird its liberty."

"Sister!" said the dragoon, in a tone of impatience, "the storm is coming on."

"Adieu all!" were the last words of the Countess, as she took her brother's arm, and went down the rough pathway leading to the valley.

In a few minutes more they had mounted their horses and set off at a quick gallop towards the turreted château that peeped above the trees three miles away. The priest and the herdsmen stood watching them in silence till they disappeared round an angle of rock, and listened till the faint echo of the horns died away in the distance.

"Dear little Queen Marguerite!" exclaimed Père Jacques, when all was silent. "Dear little Queen Marguerite, how good and kind she is!"

"And how beautiful!" murmured the priest.

Then taking a little leathern purse

from his breast, he slipped an *écu* into the mountaineer's hand.

"Good Jacques," said he, "I will take care of the partridge; but say nothing to the Countess when you see her again. Good evening, friends, and thanks for your hospitality!"

And the Curé threw his gun across his shoulder, whistled to his dog, and turned towards the pathway.

At the same moment a gathering peal of thunder rolled over the distant mountains; and the summit of Mont Cantal, visible a few moments since, was covered with thick black clouds.

"Monsieur le Curé!" cried the herdsmen, with one voice, "come back! the storm is beginning. Come back, and take shelter in the Buron!"

"The storm!" replied the priest, raising his eyes to the heavens. "Thanks, my friends, thanks! God sends the storm. Pray to Him!"

While he spoke, there came a flash of

lightning that seemed to rend open the heavens. The herdsmen crossed themselves devoutly. But the Curé of St. Saturnin had disappeared already down the pathway.

The storm came on more swiftly than they had expected. All that evening the mountains, which here extend for more than three leagues in one unbroken chain, echoed back the thunder. Sturdy oaks and mountain pines that had weathered every storm for fifty years, were torn up from their firm rootage. Huge fragments of rock, white and tempest-scarred from long exposure on bleak mountain-heights, were shivered by the lightning, and fell like fierce avalanches into the depths below.

All was darkness. The rain came down in pitilesss floods; the thunder never seemed to cease, for before the doubling echoes had half died away, fresh peals renewed and mocked them. Every flash of lightning revealed for an instant

the desolate landscape, the rocking trees, the swollen torrents rushing in floods to the valley. It was scarcely like lightning, but seemed as if the whole sky opened and blinded the world with fire.

Meanwhile the Countess and her brother arrived safely at the Château de Peyrelade; and, having changed their wet garments, were sitting before a blazing log-fire, in the big *salon* overlooking the valley. Both were silent. Their reconciliation had not been, as yet, of long duration. Marguerite could not forget her wrongs, and the Baron felt embarrassed in her presence. It is true that he endeavoured to conceal his embarrassment under an excess of courteous respect; but his smiles looked false, and his attentions always appeared, to his sister at least, to wear an air of mockery. And so they sat in the great *salon* and listened to the storm.

It was a gloomy place at all times, but

gloomier now than ever, with the winds howling round it and the rain dashing blindly against the windows. Great oaken panellings and frowning ancestral portraits adorned the walls, with here and there a stand of arms, a rusty helmet and sword, or a tattered flag that shivered when the storm swept by. Old cabinets inlaid with tortoiseshell and tarnished *or-molu* were placed between the heavy crimson draperies that hung before the windows; a long oaken table stood in the centre of the room; and above the fire-place the ghastly skull and antlers of a royal deer seemed to nod spectrally in the flickering light of the wood-fire.

At length the Baron broke silence:—

"What *are* you thinking about so intently, Madame?" said he.

"I am wondering," replied the lady, "if any hapless travellers are out in this heavy storm. If so, heaven have mercy on them!"

"Ah, truly," replied the brother, carelessly. "By the way, that poor devil of a Curé, who would not come to dinner, I wonder if he got safely back to his den at Saturnin. Do you know, Marguerite, 'tis my belief that the holy man is smitten with your beautiful eyes!"

"*Monsieur mon frère!*" exclaimed the lady indignantly, "if you forget your own position and mine, I must beg you at least to remember the profession of the holy man whom you calumniate. He is ill repaid for his goodness towards you by language such as this! But for his intercessions you would not now be my guest at Peyrelade."

"I beg a thousand pardons, my dear sister," said the Baron lightly. "Pray do not attach such importance to a mere jest. *Ce cher Curé!* he has not a better friend in the world than myself. By-the-by, has he happened to mention to you the dilapidated state of the chapel at Pradines? It should be put into proper

repair, and would cost a mere trifle—three hundred louis—which sum, however, I really cannot at present command. Now, my dear sister, you are so kind. . . ."

"George," said the Countess, gravely, "M. le Curé has not spoken to me of anything of the kind. I will not, however, refuse this sum to you; but do not deceive me. Shall you really put the money to this use? Have you quite given up play?"

"*Au diable la morale!*" muttered the dragoon between his teeth. Then he added, aloud, "If I ask it for any other use, I wish I may be—"

"No more, M. le Baron," interrupted the lady. "To-morrow morning you shall have the three hundred louis."

As she spoke these last words, a loud knocking was heard at the outer gates of the château.

"Bravo!" cried the Baron, delighted at this interruption to the conversation. "Here is a visitor. Yet, no; for what

visitor in his senses would come out on such a night? It must be a message from the king."

It was neither, for in a few moments a servant entered, saying that an accident had occurred to a traveller a short distance from the château. His horse, taking fright at the fall of a large fragment of rock, had become unmanageable, and had flung himself and his rider over a steep bank. Happily, some bushes had served to break the force of their fall, or they must inevitably have been much injured. As it was, however, the gentleman was a good deal hurt, and his servant entreated shelter within the walls of the château.

The Countess desired that the traveller should be brought into the *salon*, and a horseman be despatched to the nearest town for a surgeon.

"Ah, brother," said she, "I had a presentiment of evil this night! Alas, the unfortunate gentleman! Throw on

more logs, I beseech you, and draw this couch nearer to the fire, that we may lay him upon it."

The door was again opened, and the stranger's groom, assisted by the people of the château, brought in the wounded traveller, whom they laid upon the couch beside the fire. He was a young man of twenty-eight or thirty, slightly made, and dressed in a foreign military uniform.

The Countess, who had advanced to render some assistance, suddenly retreated and became very pale.

"What is the matter, Marguerite? What ails you?" cried her brother.

She made no reply, but leaned heavily upon his arm. At this moment the traveller, who began to recover when placed near the warmth, raised his head feebly, and looked around him. All at once his vague and wandering glance rested on Marguerite. Instantly a look of recognition flashed into his eyes. Then he raised himself by a convulsive

effort, and fell back again, insensible as before.

The Baron de Pradines, who had attentively observed this scene, turned to the stranger's groom, and asked him in a low voice the name of his master.

He could not repress a start when the man replied—"My master, Monsieur, is called the Chevalier de Fontane."

"Ah!" said the ex-captain of Royal Musketeers, as he rent one of his lace ruffles into tiny shreds that fell upon the floor, "I will not leave to-morrow!"

CHAPTER III.

THE PARSONAGE.

ANDRÉ BERNARD, Curé of the parish of St. Saturnin, was sitting in the little parlour which served him for breakfast-room, dining-room, and study. He had just said mass in the tiny chapel adjoining his garden; and now the peasants were dispersing towards their various homes, or clustering in little knots beneath the road-side trees, discussing the weather, the harvest, or the arrival of their lady the Countess in her château at Auvergne.

The pastor had hastened back to his cottage, and was already seated in his great

leathern arm-chair, busily cleaning his gun, which was laid across his knees; but at the same time, in order that mind and body should be equally employed, he was devoutly reading an office from the breviary which lay open on a stool beside him. His dog lay at his feet, sleeping. His modest array of books filled a couple of shelves behind his chair; the open window looked upon the mountain-country beyond, and admitted a sweet breath from the clustering Provence roses that hung like a frame-work round the casement. The floor was sanded. A few coloured prints of the Virgin and various saints upon the walls; a small black crucifix above the fire-place; a clock, and an old oak press behind the door, make up the list of furniture in the Curé's *salon de compagnie.*

Opposite to her master, seated in a second high-backed leathern chair, the very brother to his own, an old woman who played the important part of housekeeper in

the parsonage, sat silently spinning flax and superintending the progress of a meagre *potage* that was "simmering" on the fire. Not a sound was heard in the chamber save the monotonous rattle of the spindle, and the heavy breathing of the dog; save now and then when the priest turned a leaf of his breviary. The old woman cast frequent glances at her master through her large tortoise-shell spectacles, and seemed several times about to address him, but as often checked herself, in respect to his holy employment.

At last she could keep silence no longer.

"Monsieur le Curé," she exclaimed, in that shrill tone which age and long familiarity appears to authorise in old servants, "Monsieur le Curé, will you never have finished reading your breviary?"

The Abbé, who did not seem to hear her in the least, went on mechanically rubbing his gun, and murmuring words of the Latin office.

The old lady repeated her question—this time with more effect; for André Bernard slowly raised his head, fixed his eyes vacantly upon her, and resting the butt-end of his musket on the floor, made the sign of the cross, and reverently closed the book.

"Jeannette," said he, gravely, "here is a screw in the gun-barrel that will not hold any longer; fetch me the box of nails and screws, that I may fit it with a fresh one."

Having said these words, he opened the breviary in a fresh place, and resumed his orisons.

"Here, Monsieur le Curé," said the good housekeeper, somewhat testily, bringing out a little box of gun-smith's tools from a corner cupboard, "here is what you asked for; but I think there must be some spell on your musket if it wants mending with the little use you make of it! There is no danger of your ever wanting a new one, I'm certain. Then your powder—it never

diminishes! I have not filled your pouch for the last three weeks. Truly we should starve but for the eggs and vegetables; and the saints know that our larder has been empty for a long time!"

"What is the matter, my poor Jeannette?" said the priest, kindly, as he again looked up from his breviary. "I do not how how it is, but the game has fled from me lately."

"Say rather, Monsieur le Curé, that it is you who fly from the game! The other day M. Gaspard, the schoolmaster, told me that he met you on the mountains, and that a great hare ran past you at a yard's distance, and you only looked at it as if it had been a Christian!"

"The schoolmaster must have mistaken, Jeannette."

"Oh, no, Monsieur le Curé; Gaspard's eyes are excellent! Then your breviary—it is frightful to see you reading from morning till night, from night till morning, instead of being out in the fresh air,

and bringing back a good store of game for ourselves and our neighbours. How shall we live? If you will not kill, you must buy—and your money all goes in charity. Ah, Monsieur, you must indeed be more industrious with your gun!"

"Well, Jeannette, I promise to reform," said the priest, smiling; "I will go out this afternoon, and try to be more successful."

"Indeed I should advise it, Monsieur le Curé; and above all do not come back, as you did yesterday, wet to the skin, and bringing what, forsooth?—nothing but a miserable partridge!"

"Ah! but I do not mean to make a supper of that partridge, my good Jeannette: I mean to keep it."

"To keep it—holy Virgin! Keep a partridge! A live partridge! Why, Monsieur, it would devour our corn, and cost as much as twenty canaries. If you do these things, Monsieur, instead of giving alms you will have to beg."

"Be calm, Jeannette, my good Jeannette; we shall never be ruined by a partridge. Besides, it is a rare bird. Bring it here to me."

"Rare, Monsieur le Curé! I have seen them over and over again after a severe Winter."

"Well, Jeannette, for my sake take care of this poor little bird, for I value it greatly. Bring it here; I wish to feed it myself."

The good housekeeper looked uneasily at her master through her great spectacles, and began glancing from right to left in evident tribulation. She did not offer, however, to rise from her seat.

"Are you dreaming, Jeannette?" said the priest, with much surprise; "did you hear me?"

"Oh, yes, Monsieur le Curé. The—the partridge. . . ."

"Well?"

"Well—that is, Monsieur le Curé, you

will be a little vexed, I fear—perhaps—but the partridge—"

"Will you speak, Jeannette?"

"There—Monsieur le Curé—there was nothing in the house for supper, Monsieur le Curé—and—and so I—"

"Wretch! have you killed it?"

And the priest sprang from his seat, pale with anger, and advanced towards the terrified housekeeper, who fell upon her knees, and clasped her hands in a speechless appeal for mercy.

Even the dog ran trembling under the table, and uttered a low deprecatory howl.

Recalled to himself by the panic of his household, André Bernard threw himself back into his chair, and covered his face with his hands. Could one have removed those fingers, they would have seen large tears upon his sunken cheeks.

At this moment the door was opened quickly, and a man entered the room. The priest rose precipitately from his

chair, for in the intruder he saw no less a person than the Baron de Pradines.

"Excuse my intrusion, Monsieur le Curé," said the gentleman, whose features wore an expression of peculiar anxiety. "I wish to speak with you in private." And he glanced towards the still-kneeling Jeannette. "You see I have not yet returned to my regiment. I have, for the present, changed my plans. Pray who is this woman?"

"She is my housekeeper, Monsieur le Baron: she—she was in prayer when you entered," said André Bernard, telling another falsehood to account for the strange position of Jeannette.

Poor Abbé! he blushed and faltered, and mentally vowed another penance for his sin.

"Jeannette," he said, "you may go. I will hear the rest of your confession in the evening."

The Baron smiled furtively as the old lady rose and left the room—he

had, unfortunately, heard the latter part of the pretended confession.

"Now, Monsieur le Curé," said he, "I have come to consult you on a very grave and important subject. You are renowned in all this district for your piety and learning; tell me, do you consider vows to be sacred and indissoluble?"

The priest was surprised to hear these words from the lips of a gentleman whose reputation for light morals and free views was so extensively known; but after a few moments consideration—

"There are several kinds of vows, Monsieur le Baron," he replied; "there are vows by which we bind ourselves to the service of God, and those never must be broken. Then there are vows rashly uttered in times of mental excitement, by which people engage themselves to perform acts of sacrifice or penance."

"Ah, it is of such that I would speak!" said the captain. "What of those?

Think well, M. le Curé, before you answer me."

"It is doubtless a great sin," replied the priest, "not to fulfil such vows; but still I do not think that the good God in His mercy would desire to chastise eternally an erring creature who had thus offended him; especially if the vow were made under the strong influence of human passion."

The dragoon bit his lips angrily.

"I am no churchman, Monsieur le Curé," said he roughly, "but I cannot agree with you there. Do you forget that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac his son?"

"Yes, but I also remember that He sent an angel to arrest the father's hand."

"Possibly," said the Baron, with a bitter laugh; "but I do not believe any-of the kind myself!"

André Bernard raised his eyes to the ceiling, in pious horror.

After a moment, George de Pradines drew his chair beside the priest, and continued:—

"And yet, Monsieur le Curé, I have something to tell you that I think will change your opinion in the matter of vows."

"Proceed," murmured the priest, who was already troubled with a presentiment of evil.

"Since we parted last night, strange things have happened at the château. A wounded traveller has arrived—a traveller whom we believed long since dead. He lives. *Eh bien*, Monsieur le Curé, can you guess who he is?"

"Monsieur le Baron—I—I know not," murmured the priest; and for the third time André Bernard uttered an untruth.

"I am really surprised, Monsieur le Curé, at your want of penetration. Well, it is the Chevalier de Fontane."

At this name the priest turned pale and

trembled. He looked silently upon the ground.

"Listen, Monsieur le Curé," cried the young man determinedly; "dissimulation avails nothing. My sister is a rich widow, and I shall be ruined if she breaks her solemn vow never to marry a second time. I have already procured large sums of money upon the reversion of her estate, when she either dies or adopts a conventual life. I am not a man who could pass his days agreeably at the galleys. My future depends solely on her vow, and she *must not* marry a second time."

"But, Monsieur le Baron, it seems to me that you leap at too hasty a conclusion. Your fears may be without foundation. Madame may not wish to be absolved from her vow—Monsieur le Chevalier may no longer be desirous...."

"Bah!" interrupted the Baron, savagely, "what else is he here for? His servant has told me all. He has been for eight or nine years serving in the Prussian

army; during all that time he kept a strict watch upon France. At length he heard of the death of the late Count de Peyrelade: he obtained leave of absence when a decent time had elapsed. Loving and hoping more ardently than ever, he set off for Auvergne; he met with this accident at the very gates of the château, (would that it had killed him!); and there he is!"

The priest was silent.

"You see, Monsieur le Curé, there is but one way to prevent this marriage. My sister is pious, and rests every faith in your sanctity. She will sigh—perhaps she will weep; but is it for a priest, a minister of the church, to be swayed by trifles of this kind? No! it is for the sake of religion and heaven, Monsieur le Curé, that you will be firm and faithful to your trust. It is nothing to you if my fortunes fail or prosper—if a young woman weeps or smiles—*you* must fulfil the disinterested duties of your

sacred calling—*you* must maintain the sanctity of vows—*you* must rescue my sister from the abyss of crime into which she is falling!"

"It is quite true," said the poor Abbé, tremulously,

"Then you will render your utmost assistance?" said the Baron eagerly.

"Yes," murmured the priest.

"Monsieur le Curé, you are a holy man, and you have my esteem."

The Abbé blushed and accepted the proffered hand of the dragoon. At that moment some one knocked at the door.

"Who is there?" said the Abbé, starting like a guilty man.

"It is I," replied old Jeannette. "A servant from the château presents the compliments of Madame la Comtesse, and requests M. le Curé to pay her a visit directly on urgent business."

"You see," said the Baron, "my sister has her scruples already. Go quickly, my

dear Abbé, and do not forget that the interests of the church are in your hands. It is a holy mission!"

"A holy mission!" repeated the priest, as he turned to leave the room. "A holy mission! O *mon Dieu, mon Dieu!* do not forsake thy servant!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE VOW.

ANDRÉ BERNARD arrived at the Château de Peyrelade like a man walking in his sleep. He found that he had been ushered into the Countess's boudoir, and that he was sitting there awaiting her arrival, without having the faintest remembrance of the forest through which he must have come, the gates through which he must have passed, or the staircase which he must have ascended. Truly the Abbé Bernard had been asleep, and his sleep had lasted for two months. Now he was slowly awaking, and it was the stern reality of his position that so bewildered him.

The charm which spread itself round the young and beautiful Countess had not been unfelt by this lonely priest, whose calm and passionless existence had hitherto been passed in the society of an aged housekeeper, or of a simple and untaught peasantry. Seeing nothing for long years beyond the narrow limits of his own little world—his parsonage, his chapel, or his parishioners; familiar only with the savage grandeur of the mountains, or the cool stillnesses of the valleys, is it to be wondered at that the presence of an accomplished and graceful woman should blind the reason of a simple Curé?

Even at this moment, the perfumed atmosphere of the boudoir intoxicated him. Exotics of exquisite shape and colour, with long drooping leaves and heavy white and purple blossoms, were piled against the windows; a Persian carpet, gorgeous with eastern dyes—

"Orange and azure deep'ning into gold,"

was spread beneath his feet. Yonder was her lute; here were some of her favourite books; all around, draperies of pink silk fell from the ceiling, and curtained round the boudoir like a tent.

The Abbé laid his head upon his hand, and groaned aloud.

When he again looked up, the Countess was standing beside him, with an unwonted trouble in her face — a trouble that might have been pity, or anxiety, or shame, or a mingling of all three.

She began to speak; she hesitated; her voice trembled, and her words were indistinct.

André Bernard was suddenly aroused from his dream. The lover, not the priest, was awakened.

He rose abruptly.

"Madame la Comtesse," he said, sternly, "spare yourself useless and sinful words. I know why you have sent for me to-day; and I tell you that the

All-Powerful who has received your vow, commands you by my lips to observe its sanctity."

The young woman cast a terrified glance at the gloomy countenance of the priest, and hid her face in her hands.

"Then, Monsieur le Curé, the All-Powerful bids me die!"

"No, you will not die," replied the Abbé, in the same profound and steady voice—"you will not die. Heaven, which gave you strength to bear the first separation, will enable you to sustain the second."

"Alas! alas!" cried the Countess, in a piercing tone, "I had thought to be so happy!"

The priest dug his nails into the palms of his clenched hands. A convulsive tremor shook him from head to foot, and he gasped for breath. Before he had seen her, he had prepared a host of holy consolations for the wounded heart; but now that he had it before him, trembling and bleeding like

the stricken bird which had nestled in his breast the night before, he had not a word of comfort or pity to soothe her anguish. Every tear that forced its way between her slender fingers, fell like a burning coal upon the conscience of the good Curé. In this cruel perplexity he murmured a brief prayer for strength and guidance.

"Alas, Madame," he faltered, "do you then love him so deeply?"

"I have loved him all my life!" she cried despairingly.

The priest was silent. He threw open the window, and suffered the evening breeze to cool his brow and lift his long black hair.

Then he returned.

"Marguerite," he said, in a broken voice, "be it as you will. In the name of the living God, I release you from your vow; and if in this a wrong should be committed, henceforth I take that sin upon my soul."

Powerfully moved, glowing with excitement, elevated for the moment by a rapture of generosity—feeling, perhaps, as the martyrs of old, when they went triumphant to their deaths, and sealed their faith with blood—so André Bernard stood in the glory of the setting sun, rapt, illumined, glorified. And Marguerite de Peyrelade, dimly conscious of the dark struggle that had passed through his soul and the divine victory which he had achieved, fell on her knees as to a deity, calling upon him as her saviour, her benefactor!

"Not unto me, Marguerite, but unto Him," said André, releasing his hand gently from her lips, and pointing upwards. "It is not I who give you happiness. *C'est Dieu qui l'envoie. Priez Dieu!*" And he pointed to a crucifix against the wall.

The young woman bowed before the sacred emblem in speechless gratitude, and when she rose from her knees the priest was gone.

In an hour from this time, two persons were sitting together on the terrace, upon which opened the Countess's boudoir. One was a young man, pale, but with a light of joy in his countenance that replaced the bloom of health. He was seated in an easy chair, and wrapped in a large military cloak. The other was a woman, young and beautiful, who sat on a low stool at his feet, with her cheek resting on his hand. They spoke at intervals in low caressing tones, and seemed calmly, speechlessly happy.

Far around them extended range beyond range of purple mountains, quiet valleys, and long, dark masses of foliage tinted with all the hues of autumn and golden in the sun. No traces of the late storm were visible, save that here and there a tree lay prostrate, and one or two brawling streams that but yesterday were tiny rivulets, dashed foaming through the valleys.

Presently the red disc of the sun dis-

appeared slowly behind the tree-tops; the gathered clouds faded into grey; the mountain summits grew darker, and their outline more minutely distinct; a mist came over the valley; and a star gleamed out above.

The lady wrapped his cloak more closely round her lover, to protect him from the evening air, and then resumed her lowly seat. And so they sat, looking at the stars and into one another's eyes, listening to the distant sheep-bell, or the lowing of the herds as they were driven home to their stalls.

"Methinks, sweet one," said the gentleman, as he looked down at the dear head laid against his hand—"methinks, that in an hour such as this, with thee beside me, I should love to die!"

But the lady kissed his hand, and then his brow, and looked at him with eyes that were filled only with life and love.

That night the Baron de Pradines set off to join his regiment.

CHAPTER V.

THE SUPPER OF ALL-SAINT'S EVE.

TWO months quickly passed away in the Château de Peyrelade, during which the Chevalier de Fontane had recovered from his accident, and the Countess from her melancholy. Preparations had been making for the last three weeks for the celebration of their marriage. Workmen from Paris had been decorating the rooms; a dignitary of the church was invited to perform the ceremony; and all the nobility for miles around were invited to the *fête*. Even the Baron de Pradines, mortally offended as he was by the whole

business, had at last consented to be friends, and had accepted an invitation to the wedding. In a word, the contract was to be signed on the evening of All-Saints' Day, and the marriage was to take place the following morning.

At length All-Saints' Day arrived, a grey, cold, snowing morning. Autumn is wintry enough, sometimes, in the Haute Auvergne. The earth looks bare and hard, the chestnut-trees are all stripped of their thick foliage, and the snow has encroached half-way down the sides of the mountains. The raw north-east wind rushes howling through the passes and along the valley, carrying with it at sunrise and sunset drifting sleet and fine snow. Soon it will come down thick and fast, and bury all the bushes in its white mantle. Now the herdsmen's huts are empty, and the cows are transferred to the warm stabling of the château.

Marguerite de Peyrelade, sitting in her *salon*, surrounded by a gay and noble

company, is ill at ease, thinking of the dark night, of the falling snow, of the howling wolves, and of the Chevalier de Fontane, who has been out since morning and is momentarily expected at the château. He has been to the notary's in the neighbouring town respecting the marriage-settlements, and has promised to return in time for the great supper of All-Saints' Eve. The Baron de Pradines is also to arrive to-night to be present at the signing of the contract; and the young Countess, whose heart is overflowing with love and charity, is even a little concerned for the safety of her ungracious brother.

Parisian workmen have effected wondrous changes in the great dark *salon* of the Château de Peyrelade. Who would recognize, in the brilliantly lighted reception-room blazing with chandeliers and mirrors, furnished with exquisite taste, garlanded with evergreens, and crowded with all the rank and pride

of Auvergne, the gloomy, cavernous hall with the rusty armour and ghostly antlers of two months since?

Uniforms and glittering orders were abundant. There was the Marquis de Florac, gorgeous with the ribbon and decoration of St. John of Jerusalem; the Count de Saint Flour, in his uniform as Colonel of the St. Flour cavalry; the Commander de Fontane, cousin of the bridegroom, in a rich court dress redolent of Versailles; the Lieutenant of Police; the Seigneur de Rochevert, who owned the adjoining estate; several officers, a cabinet minister, some diplomatic gentlemen, and one or two younger sons from the colleges and the Polytechnique. The gentlemen were gathered in little knots, playing at ombre and piquet: the ladies were assembled round *la belle reine Marguerite.*

But the queen of the fête was anxious and abstracted, and her thoughts wandered away to the Chevalier de Fontane and

his lonely journey. The time-piece in the ante-chamber struck nine. No one heard it but Marguerite. Neither laughter, nor music, nor the sound of many voices could drown that silvery reverberation, however, for her listening ears. Her impatience became intolerable, for the Chevalier should have returned full three hours before. At last she rose and slipped quietly out of the room, through the ante-chamber, along the corridor, and so into her little quiet boudoir, far away from the jarring merriment of her guests. There she wrapped herself in a great cloak lined with sables, opened the window, and stepped out on the terrace.

It was a gloomy night. The moon shone fitfully through masses of black cloud. There was snow upon the terrace; snow in the garden beneath; snow in the valley; snow on the distant mountains. The silence was profound; not a sound was audible from the noisy *salon;* not a sound from the distant forest. All around lay deep

shadow and spectral moonlight; and upon all the scene a stillness as of death. Suddenly, in the midst of the silence, Marguerite de Peyrelade heard the sharp, clear report of a distant musket shot. She listened, trembling and terrified. It was instantly followed by another.

"*Oh, mon Dieu!*" murmured the young woman, leaning for support against the window-frame; "what Christian hunts at such an hour as this? Heaven protect Eugène!"

And now another sound almost as deadly—a prolonged howling of wolves startled in their lair—came up from the valley. Then the moon became obscured by heavy clouds, and snow began to fall.

The Countess re-entered her boudoir, closed the windows hastily, and was glad once more to find herself in the noisy *salon*.

"Our hostess looks very pale," whispered the Marquis de Florac to his partner at

ombre. "She is anxious, I suppose, for the arrival of M. de Fontane."

"Very likely," said his companion—"I play the king."

"Is Madame unwell?" asked a young Colonel of Hussars, going up to her with a profound salutation. "Madame appears much agitated."

"I have heard something very strange," stammered the Countess, as she sank into a chair: "the report of a gun!"

"Indeed, Madame!" said the Lieutenant of Police. "That is somewhat strange at this hour of the evening!"

"And it was followed by—by a second," said the Countess.

"Stranger still!" muttered the Lieutenant.

"Pooh! nothing but the fall of some fragment of rock up in the mountains yonder," said the Commander de Fontane, with a gay laugh. "The days of banditti are past. Do not be alarmed, *chère petite cousine;* Eugène is safe enough,

and knows how to take care of himself."

"He should have been here some hours ago, Monsieur," replied the lady.

At this moment the door of the *salon* was thrown open, and the Majordomo announced that supper was served.

"But the two principal guests are not yet here," cried the Marquis de Florac. "Monsieur le Chevalier de Fontane, and Monsieur le Baron de Pradines!"

"Three are wanting, M. le Marquis," said the Countess, forcing a smile. "Our good Abbé Bernard, the Curé of St. Saturnin, has not yet arrived; and how could we take our places at table without his presence on All-Saints' Eve? We must wait awhile for the three missing guests. I am surprised at the absence of M. le Curé, for he has the shortest road to travel; not more than a quarter of a league."

"A quarter of a league, did you say?" exclaimed the Commander: "is that all?

Why, with a good horse it would not take more than five minutes to go and return. If you command it, Madame, I will fly to M. le Curé, and bring him to your feet dead or alive!"

"Monsieur, I thank you," said the Countess, smiling; "but here is our worthy Abbé!"

At the same instant the Curé of St. Saturnin was ushered into the *salon*. He looked strangely white and wan; his teeth chattered; his hands were damp and cold.

"At last, Monsieur le Curé!" said the Countess, as she advanced to meet him.

"At last, Monsieur le Curé!" repeated several voices.

"Five minutes later, Monsieur le Curé, and I protest that Madame's *chef de cuisine* would have committed suicide for grief at the ruin of the *ragoûts*, and you would have had murder on your conscience!" exclaimed the Commander.

"Murder!" echoed André Bernard in a hollow voice, staring round him upon the company — "who speaks here of murder?"

"For shame, Monsieur le Commandeur! you alarm our good Abbé," said Madame de Peyrelade. "Come to the fire, Monsieur le Curé; you are trembling from cold."

"The supper is served," said the Majordomo for the second time, with an appealing look towards his mistress.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will wait no longer for Monsieur de Fontane or my brother," said the Countess, rising. "The former will doubtless be here before supper is over; and the Baron de Pradines is possibly detained at court, and may not arrive till to-morrow. We will defer supper no longer. Your arm, Monsieur de Florac."

The supper was laid out in the great hall of the château. Wine and jests went round. Even the Countess recovered her

spirits, and joined in the gaiety of her guests.

"Remove those two covers," said she. "We will tell these gentlemen, if they arrive, that they shall have no supper by way of penance."

"No, no," exclaimed the Commander; "I protest against the sentence! They will be here soon, and deserve pity rather than reproof. Who knows? Perhaps my cousin and the Baron have agreed to surprise us at the supper-table, and will both be in the midst of us in a few minutes."

"Both!" ejaculated the priest, casting a terrified glance at the vacant chairs.

"And why not, Monsieur le Curé? I remember, when I was some twelve years younger, being invited to sup with a party of friends at ten leagues' distance. It was a pouring night, but there was a pretty girl in question, and so I rode through the rain, and arrived just at the right time, but wet to the skin. These

gentlemen would either of them undertake a similar expedition, and I will answer for it they will both be here before supper is over. Come, I bet a hundred crowns! Who will take it? Will you, Monsieur le Curé?"

"I? Heaven forbid!" cried the priest.

"Well, you will not refuse to drink their healths?" said the Commander, as he filled the priest's glass and his own. "The health of Messieurs le Baron de Pradines and le Chevalier de Fontane!"

"Thanks, cousin, for the honour!" cried a voice from the farther end of the hall. "When I am a little thawed, I shall be happy to return the compliment!"

And the Chevalier de Fontane, flushed from riding, and radiant with happiness, came hastening up to kiss the hand of his betrothed.

"*Mon dieu*, Monsieur de Fontane, what has happened?" cried the lady beside whom he took his seat; "your

neckcloth and ruffles are covered with blood!"

"A mere trifle, Madame de Rochevert," laughed the young officer, holding up his hand, round which a handkerchief was bound; "a tussle with a wolf, who would fain have supped off of your humble servant, instead of suffering him to occupy this chair by your side—*voilà tout!*"

"How horrible!" exclaimed several ladies.

Madame de Peyrelade turned pale, and murmured a prayer of thanks to Heaven.

Healths went round again. Everyone drank to the Chevalier, and congratulated him upon his victory. Then the conversation turned upon the Baron de Pradines.

"It is now too late to hope for his arrival," said Marguerite. "I trust *he* has met with no wolves on the road."

"Let us drink to him," said the Com-

mander, and perhaps, like my cousin Eugène, he may come upon us at the very moment. The health of M. le Baron de Pradines !"

"The health of M. le Baron de Pradines !" cried all the voices.

"I denounce M. l'Abbé of high treason," exclaimed a lady. "He never opened his lips, and put down his glass untasted !"

The Curé was dumb with consternation.

"For shame, M. le Curé !" cried the merry-makers. "We can have no abstinence to-night. Do penance, and drink the health alone."

"To the health of M. le Baron de Pradines !" said the priest in a hollow voice, and emptied his glass at a draught.

"Bravo ! bravo, M. le Curé !" cried the gentlemen, rattling their glasses, by way of applause. "Nothing like the *amende honorable !*"

At this moment, a succession of thun-

dering blows upon the outer gate startled the revellers into a momentary silence.

"The Baron de Pradines, for a hundred crowns!" cried the Marquis de Florac.

André Bernard turned paler than before.

"Who comes?" asked the Countess. "Go, Pierre," she said to a servant behind her chair, "go and see if it be M. de Pradines."

In a moment the valet returned, pale and speechless. A confused murmur was heard without.

"Who is there?" asked the Countess.

"Doubtless," said the Curé, in a hoarse wandering voice, "doubtless it is one of the guests who has arrived in time for the dessert."

At these words everyone rose from table, struck by a fatal presentiment.

The door opened, and Père Jacques appeared, followed by his two assistants. They carried the body of a man wrapped in a military cloak. The Countess recog-

nising the body of her brother, uttered a piercing cry and hid her face in her hands. . Silent and terror-stricken, the company stood looking at each other. The Curé clasped his hands as if in prayer; the Lieutenant of Police went over and examined the body.

"This is not the work of a robber," said he, "for the jewels and purse of the Baron are untouched. He has been shot in the temple. Does any person here present know anything of this murder?"

No one spoke.

"Where was the body found?"

"We discovered it near the foot of Mont Cantal, with M. le Baron's horse standing beside it, M. le Lieutenant," replied Père Jacques.

"Does any person know of any enemy whom M. le Baron may have had in this neighbourhood?" pursued the officer of police.

"Alas, Monsieur," replied the cow-keeper, bluntly, "the Baron de Pradines

had very few friends in these parts, but no enemy, I think, who would serve him a turn like this."

"Does any person know if M. le Baron had any difference or quarrel lately with any person?"

There was a profound silence; but more than one glance was directed towards the Chevalier de Fontane.

The Lieutenant of Police repeated the inquiry.

"I—I know of only one person, Monsieur," stammered the *boutilier*, "and—and——"

He was silent: a stern look from Père Jacques arrested the words upon his lips, and he said no more.

"And that person?"

"Pardon, M. le Lieutenant, but—but I will not say."

"Answer, I command you," said the officer, "in the name of the King."

"It is—M. le Chevalier de Fontane!" gasped the terrified peasant.

"You hear this, Monsieur," said the Lieutenant. "What answer do you make? Have you had a quarrel with the late Baron?"

"I acknowledge—that is—I——" faltered the young man in evident confusion and dismay.

"Enough, Monsieur. Appearances, I regret to say, are against you. You arrive late; your dress is disordered; your apparel is blood-stained, and your hand is wounded. I am grieved beyond measure; but I am compelled to arrest you on the charge of murder."

CHAPTER VI.

THE LIEUTENANT OF POLICE.

WHEN misfortune falls upon a house in the midst of feasting and revelry, the guests, of late so friendly and familiar, shun the presence of their entertainers as if there were contagion in the very air. It is as if the plague had broken out within the walls, and as if the black flag were alone needed to complete the resemblance.

So it was in the Château de Peyrelade after the arrival of the body of the Baron de Pradines. Some few of the guests who lived in the immediate neighbourhood, mounted their horses and hastened home that very night. Others, not caring

for the night-journey through a mountain-country in fast-falling snow, waited courageously for the dawn. All, however, rose so early next morning and contrived so well that, by the time the sun poured his full radiance into the disordered apartments, not a soul remained in the château beyond its usual inhabitants. The kitchens that had been so busy with cooks and servants, the *salon* that had been thronged with visitors, the supper-room that had of late been the scene of festivity and mirth—all were deserted; and on the supper-table lay the body of the murdered man, covered with a sheet.

We have said that all the guests were gone; but this was not strictly true, for two remained at the château—the Commandeur de Fontane, cousin to the prisoner, and the Lieutenant of Police. The former had stayed to stand by his kinsman; the latter, in the prosecution of his duties. Determined to investigate the

matter to the utmost, he had already despatched two of his servants to the town of St. Flour, to command the instant attendance of a detachment of *gendarmerie.* Father Jacques, and the unfortunate *boutilier*, who had (through sheer terror and excitement) betrayed the hostility existing between the Baron and the Chevalier, were placed with loaded muskets before the door of the wretched bridegroom's chamber. The public crier was sent round the parish of St. Santurin to proclaim rewards for information tending to throw light upon the murder of the high and puissant George, Baron de Pradines, and, during life, Captain of the Auvergne Light Dragoons.

In short, Monsieur the Lieutenant of Police was an active and intelligent officer, and before noon on the day following the event, had done all that was in the power of man towards discovering the particulars of the dreadful deed, and securing the person of the supposed offender.

Having discharged these duties, the worthy lieutenant found himself altogether unemployed. Nothing more could be done till the arrival of the *gendarmerie* from St. Flour; so he resolved to go into the supper-room and examine the body of the Baron de Pradines.

The Countess de Peyrelade, veiled and in deep mourning, was kneeling at the foot of the table, absorbed in prayer. He signified by a gesture that he had no intention of disturbing her orisons; and as she once more resumed her attitude of devotion, he turned down the sheet, and attentively contemplated the body. M. le Lieutenant was a man eminently skilful in his profession, and he was not ignorant of the importance of slight indications. He knew how frequently the weightiest discoveries lie concealed beneath a veil of the commonest circumstances.

George de Pradines was yet dressed in the clothes which he had worn at the

moment of his fall. His features, even in death, preserved their habitually proud and sarcastic expression; nay, it even seemed as if the haughty lip were curved more mockingly than ever. The bullet-hole on his temple proved that he was face to face with the murderer when attacked. This circumstance precluded, at least, all suspicion of a cowardly ambush. What if he could be shown to have fallen in a duel!

The Lieutenant of Police took up the musket lying beside the body. It was loaded. He then examined the pistols which were in the belt around the dead man's waist. They were loaded likewise. Strange! Had he not even defended himself, though facing his murderer's weapon? And then had not Madame de Peyrelade, returning to the *salon* pale and terrified, told the assembled company in evident terror that she had distinctly heard *two* reports of a gun in the direction of the mountains?

Presently Madame de Peyrelade rose from her knees, and burst into tears.

"He is not guilty, Monsieur le Lieutenant!" she cried, sobbing. "Eugène is not guilty! Why have you accused him of this fearful crime? Why have you brought this misery upon us? Was it not enough," she said, pointing to the body, "was it not enough that my brother should be assassinated, but that *you*—the guest under my roof—should seek to fix the guilt upon my betrothed husband?"

"Madame la Comtesse," replied the Lieutenant, with severe courtesy, "you forget that I am but fulfilling my duty to the state. It is not I who act, but the law in my person. I do not say that Monsieur de Fontane is guilty. It is for the Judge to decide that point. Appearances are strongly against him: public opinion accused him before I did: the suspicions of your friends and dependents were directed to him at once. Madame, be just."

Marguerite's gentle heart was touched.

"Monsieur le Lieutenant," she said, "I was in the wrong. Forgive me."

"Madame," replied the gentleman, kindly, as he held the door for her to pass, "retire now to your chamber, and take some rest. I fear that it will be our painful duty, ere night, to remove the body of the Baron de Pradines to St. Flour. Should such commands arrive from the judicial authorities, I regret to say that it will be imperative upon me to include yourself, some of your people, and the Chevalier de Fontane among our party. Fear nothing, Madame, and hope for the best. Perseverance alone can aid us now; and the stricter are our investigations, the more completely shall we, I hope, prove the innocence of Monsieur de Fontane."

The lady retired, and the Lieutenant of Police returned to his contemplation of the corpse.

He was not wrong. Before night a party of soldiers arrived, bringing with them a

paper of instructions from the authorities both military and civil. Before day-break on the following morning the gloomy procession—including the countess, two of her women-servants, the Chevalier de Fontane, Father Jacques, and his assistants—set off for St. Flour. The body of the murdered officer, in a plain black coffin borne upon the shoulders of six *gendarmes*, brought up the rear.

From the moment of his arrest the Chevalier had scarcely spoken, except to utter broken ejaculations of grief and horror. The mountaineers who guarded the door of his chamber had heard him restlessly pacing to and fro all that dreadful night.

Food had been twice or thrice brought to him, but there it still lay untouched, untasted. Being summoned to the carriage that was to convey him to St. Flour, he went quite silently and submissively, between a couple of guards.

In the hall they passed the coffin. For

a moment the young man paused. He turned very pale, took off his hat, crossed himself devoutly, and passed on.

Only once he was seen to give way to emotion. It was when the Lieutenant of Police stepped into the carriage and took his seat opposite to him.

"Monsieur," he exclaimed, passionately, "one word, for mercy's sake! Does she believe that I am guilty?"

"Monsieur de Fontane," replied the Lieutenant, briefly but kindly, "Madame la Comtesse entertains no doubt of your innocence."

The prisoner's whole countenance brightened. He bent his head gratefully, and spoke no more during the rest of the journey.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRIAL.

THE court-house was crowded in every part. The judge in gloomy state, the robed lawyers, the busy *avocats*, the imperious ushers—all were there. It was a dark, wintry day. The great chandeliers were lighted in the hall. The windows were closed; but a little patch of daylight streamed in at the *œil-de-bœuf* overhead, and made the murky atmosphere still darker by contrast.

All Madame de Peyrelade's dear friends, who had fled so precipitately the evening of the murder, might have been seen in various parts of the court-house, chatter-

ing to each other with the most lively interest, and now and then affecting a tone of profound compassion for "*ce pauvre* Baron," or "*cette charmante* Madame la Comtesse." They, however, agreed unanimously in condemning the unfortunate Chevalier. All had discovered that his countenance wore a very cruel and sinister expression. One had never liked him from a boy: another had mistrusted him from the first: a third said it was rumoured that he had been much disliked in Prussia, and even dismissed the service: a fourth would not be in the least surprised to hear that this assassination was not the first of which he had been guilty.

The object of these charitable remarks sat, however, pale and composed, in the space railed off for the prisoner. Not the soldiers who stood behind his chair were more completely unmoved. He looked worn and sorrowful, but neither desponding nor abashed. He was dressed in a suit of complete mourning. His lawyer sat at a

table near him, with far the more troubled countenance of the two. In a room set apart for the witnesses at the farther end of the Justice Hall might have been observed the three herdsmen who discovered the body, the Chevalier's servant, some *gendarmes*, and several strangers.

Near the bench, on a raised platform, sat a veiled lady in deep mourning, surrounded by a party of her friends. This was Madame de Peyrelade. Near her stood the Commandeur de Fontane, the Lieutenant of Police, and some other gentlemen of the province.

A dense crowd of townspeople, Auvergne peasants, and country gentry filled the court-house to the very passages and anterooms.

The proceedings opened with a short address from the Advocate-General, of which not one syllable was to be heard above the incessant hum of voices. Then he sat down, and Père Jacques was placed in the witness-box.

The noise instantly subsided; the interest of the assembled multitude was excited; and the business of the day began in earnest.

The honest cowkeeper gave his testimony in a straightforward, unhesitating voice. He had been to high mass at the chapel of St. Saturnin with his two companions—Pierre, the *boutilier*, and Henri, the herdsman. They were returning from thence to the Château de Peyrelade, where Madame had invited all her dependents to supper in the servant's hall, while she gave a grand entertainment in the state-rooms to all the gentry of the province. He (Jacques) and his friends were walking leisurely along, laughing and talking, and thinking of nothing but the wedding which was to take place on the morrow. When they had turned the foot of the Rocher Rouge, which lies between the chapel and the Château, and were coming down into the valley, Henri, who was a little in advance, gave a great cry, and shouted "Murder!"

And sure enough, when he (Jacques) came up, there was a man lying upon his face under a tree, with his horse standing beside him, trembling all over and covered with foam. They lifted the body, and found that it was the Baron de Pradines. Then they wrapped it in his cloak, and picked up the musket, which had fallen beside him on the grass. There was no one in sight, and there were no signs of any struggle. He (Jacques) felt the body: the Baron was quite dead, but not yet cold. He had no more to say.

M. le Lieutenant de Police. "At what hour of the evening did this occur?"

Jacques. "As near as I can guess, M. le Lieutenant, about nine, or a quarter past."

Lieut. "Was it dark at the time?"

Jacques. "It was neither dark nor light, Monsieur. The moon kept going in and out, and the snow began to come down just after we had found the body."

Lieut. "Did you hear any shots fired?"

Jacques. "No, M. le Lieutenant."

Lieut. "But if the body was not cold, the shots could not have been fired very long before you discovered it?"

Jacques. "That might be, too, M. le Lieutenant; for the wind set the other way, towards the Château, and would have carried the noise away from us."

Lieut. "At what time did the mass begin?"

Jacques. "At seven o'clock, Monsieur le Lieutenant."

Pierre and Henri were next examined.

These witnesses corroborated the testimony of Father Jacques. The first in a nervous and confused manner, the second in a bold and steady voice. Pierre looked several times in a contrite and supplicating manner towards the Chevalier de Fontane and Madame de Peyrelade; but neither observed him.

He was very penitent and unhappy. He felt that it was through his indiscretion

that the betrothed lover of his mistress was placed in this position of peril; and he would have given the world to be far enough away in the desolate *Buron*.

Henri stated that, after finding the body, he climbed the high tree beneath which it lay, for the purpose of reconnoitring; but no person was in sight.

The Lieutenant of Police next examined the *boutilier* Pierre.

Lieut. "Repeat what you said of the quarrel between Monsieur le Chevalier and the Baron de Pradines."

Pierre. [in great confusion]: "I know nothing, Monsieur, beyond what the poor people say about the village."

Lieut. "Well, and what do the poor people say about the village?"

Pierre. "Indeed, Monsieur, I know nothing."

Lieut. "You must speak. You must not trifle with the law."

Pierre. "*Mon Dieu!* they only said that Monsieur le Baron wanted Madame's

money and estates himself, and that he hated Monsieur le Chevalier, because Monsieur le Chevalier loved Madame and Madame loved him."

Lieut. "And from whom did you hear these reports?"

Pierre. "From Père Jacques, Monsieur le Lieutenant."

Lieut. [cross-examining Jacques the cow-keeper] "What did *you* know, witness, of the difference between these gentlemen?"

Jacques. "Nothing, M. le Lieutenant."

Lieut. "Did you ever hear of any such quarrel?"

Jacques. "I don't deny to have heard it talked about, Monsieur."

Lieut. "Whom did you hear talk about it?"

Jacques. "I have heard Gustave, Monsieur le Chevalier's valet, say so many times."

Lieut. [examining Gustave] "Relate all you know or have heard respecting the differences that are said to have arisen

between your master and the late Baron de Pradines."

Gustave. "I came with my master, the Chevalier de Fontane, from Prussia, about ten weeks ago. As soon as we got near the Château de Peyrelade, my master met with an accident. We got him into the house, where he stayed some weeks, till he had quite recovered. The Countess and my master were old lovers, and very glad to meet each other again. They made up the match between themselves the very next day, and Madame sent for a priest, who absolved her of a vow that she had made, never to marry again. After the priest was gone, M. le Baron, who had been out since the morning, came home, and Madame informed him that she was betrothed to the Chevalier, and that the marriage would take place in a few weeks. M. le Baron was furious. He swore at Madame, and at M. de Fontane, and even at the priest. He asked Madame if she had no respect for her vow or her soul,

and he called M. le Chevalier a villain and a coward to his face. M. le Chevalier was too ill and weak to pay any attention to him; but Madame was very indignant, and told her brother that it was himself who was the coward, so to insult a woman and a sick man. In a word, Madame said that, if he could not conduct himself more like a gentleman, he had better leave the house. And so M. le Baron did leave the house that very night, and set off for his regiment. But it did not end here. M. le Baron had been gone only a very few days when he sent abusive and violent letters to Madame, and to Monsieur le Chevalier; and I heard that he had also the audacity to send one to the holy priest; but this I cannot be sure of. Madame had no sooner read hers than she burnt it; but Monsieur le Chevalier only laughed, and threw his into his writing-case. He said that the writer deserved a good thrashing, but did not seem at all angry. In a few days there came another letter

to M. le Chevalier, and this time the Baron threatened to bring the matter before Holy Church on account of Madame's broken vow, as he called it; for he would not hear of the absolution granted by M. le Curé. This letter vexed M. le Chevalier a good deal, for he could not bear the idea of Madame's name being brought into a court of ecclesiastical law; and so he wrote back a very sharp answer to M. le Baron, representing the odium which it would bring both upon himself and the family, and telling him how perfectly useless such a step would be, since Madame was altogether absolved from her rash engagement. Well, the Baron never wrote any reply to this letter; but about a week before All Saints' Day, Madame sent a very kind and loving letter to her brother (at least so I overheard her telling Monsieur le Chevalier), and invited him to the wedding. Whether it was that M. le Baron thought it would be no use holding out; or whether he really was

sorry for having been so unkind; or whether he only intended to spoil the festivities by being disagreeable to everybody, I cannot tell; but at all events he wrote back, accepting Madame's invitation, and saying he hoped she would be happy, and that she and Monsieur would forget the past, and receive him as a brother. You may be sure that Madame was delighted; and Monsieur le Chevalier declared that for his part he was quite ready to shake hands with him. No more letters passed, and I never saw M. de Pradines again till he was brought in dead on the evening of All Saints' Day."

Here the judge desired that the writing-case of M. de Fontane should be brought into court; and a small black folio was accordingly laid upon the table by one of the attendants. It was found to contain, among various unimportant papers, two letters from the deceased addressed to M. le Chevalier. Both were corroborative of the depositions of the last witness,

and were couched in violent and abusive language.

The Lieutenant of Police, cross-examining the servant of M. de Fontane, then continued :—

"Where was M. de Fontane on All-Saints' Day ?"

Gustave. "My master left the Château early in the morning for Murat, where the notary resided to whom he had confided the drawing up of the contract and settlements. Monsieur was to have returned by six o'clock, bringing the papers with him ; but he did not arrive till between nine and ten o'clock."

Lieut. "Let the notary be called."

M. François, notary and *avocat* of Murat, was then called to the witness-box.

Lieut. "At what hour did the Chevalier de Fontane leave your offices at Murat ?"

M. François. "At about six o'clock : the papers were not ready, and he waited for them."

Lieut. "How long would it take a man to ride from Murat to the Château?"

M. François. "About two hours."

Lieut. "He should then have reached Peyrelade about eight?"

M. François. I suppose so, Monsieur."

Lieut. "Did the Chevalier appear at all excited or out of humour?"

M. François. "He appeared excited, and in the highest spirits; but not in the least out of humour."

Marguerite de Peyrelade, *née* Pradines, was then summoned by the crier. She rose from her chair with difficulty, leaning on the arm of the Commandeur, and was about to proceed to the witness-box, but the judge begged her to remain seated.

A sympathetic murmur ran through the court. She raised her veil and looked steadily at the Lieutenant, never once glancing towards the prisoner, who, pale and trembling, was observing her every movement.

"Madame de Peyrelade," said the

Lieutenant, "do you remember to have heard M. de Fontane utter any hostile expressions on receipt of either of the letters lately examined?"

Madame had nothing to say beyond what had been stated by Gustave, Monsieur de Fontane's servant.

"Did Madame think that Monsieur de Fontane thoroughly pardoned the imprudent language of M. de Pradines?"

The lady said that she believed it from her heart.

"Did not Madame, on the night of her *fête*, leave the *salon* and go out a little after nine o'clock on the terrace at the west side of the Château?"

She answered in the affirmative.

"Did not Madame aver that she then heard two shots fired, at a considerable distance from the Château?"

She did, and was greatly terrified.

"Could Madame have been mistaken as to the second report? Is Madame certain that she distinguished more than one?"

The Countess said that she undoubtedly heard a second.

"Still, might not Madame have been deceived—by an echo, for instance?"

The lady was convinced of the accuracy of her statement.

Here there was a pause of some minutes, during which the lawyers whispered together, and the Lieutenant of Police conferred with the Judge.

He then went on with the examination.

"How long an interval elapsed, Madame, between the two reports?"

"Scarcely a minute, I should think," replied the Countess.

There was another pause. Then the Lieutenant of Police thanked her for her information, and intimated that, for the present, she would not be troubled farther.

Some *gendarmes* were then summoned, and gave their evidence as follows:—

Paul Dubourg, gendarme in the *Baillage* of St. Flour. "I have examined the body and fire-arms of the late Baron, in the

presence of M. le Lieutenant of Police. A musket was found lying beside the body, and a brace of pistols were in his riding-belt. None of these had been discharged. All the pieces were loaded.

Lieut. "Should you suppose that the Baron had made any defence?"

P. Dubourg. "Evidently none, Monsieur."

Michel Perrin, gendarme in the *Baillage* of St. Flour, corroborated the testimony of Paul Dubourg.

Monsieur Berthet, Surgeon, was then called for. He testified that the Baron de Pradines had died of a fracture of the skull caused by a wound in the temple. The wound was given by a musket-ball, which had struck him three-quarters of an inch above the eyebrow, and entered the brain. He (M. Berthet) had extracted the ball, which he now laid before the Court. From the wound being inflicted in the front of the head, witness concluded that he must have been face to face with the

assassin. At the same time, the fact of none of his own weapons being used countenanced the probability of a surprise. Could not conceive how it was possible that *two* shots should have been fired without the Baron's offering any resistance. Had the first taken effect, there was then no need of a second: whereas, if the first failed, the Baron would surely have defended himself against a second. Had no more to say, and left the witness-box.

Louis Masson, groom to Madame de Peyrelade, was next examined.

Lieut. of Police. "You were in the stables when Monsieur de Fontane returned on the evening of All Saints' Day?"

L. Masson. "I was, Monsieur le Lieutenant."

Lieut. "In what condition was his horse when he arrived?"

L. Masson. "The horse was covered with sweat, and appeared to have been ridden fast. It trembled a good deal

likewise, as if it had been frightened, and there were some spots of blood on the chest and knees. The saddle was also spotted with blood."

Lieut. "How did M. de Fontane seem when he rode in?"

L. Masson. "He seemed very much excited, M. le Lieutenant. His neckcloth and waistcoat were stained with blood, and his hand was tied in a handkerchief."

Lieut. "Did he make any remarks to you about it?"

L. Masson. "Yes, Monsieur, he laughed a good deal, in a wild sort of way, and said he had been settling a wolf among the mountains."

There was a movement of horror throughout the Court.

Lieut. "A wolf? Did you believe him?"

L. Masson. "Why, yes, Monsieur; none of us doubted him, for he's a brave young gentleman, and has killed many a

noted wolf in the woods about Pradines, in the old Baron's time. To be sure, when M. le Baron was brought in, soon after, we could not help recollecting the disagreement which they had lately had, and we did think that M. le Chevalier had indeed settled a wolf; but one of another sort. However, I said nothing till Pierre the *boutilier* spoke out to your worship in the hall."

Lieut. "Bring into court the clothes worn by the Chevalier de Fontane and the firearms that he carried about his person on the evening in question."

A servant here laid some clothes, a musket, and a pair of holsters on the table. The clothes were then carefully examined. The waistcoat, cravat, and shirt-front were spotted in several places with blood. The lawyers shook their heads, and the prisoner's advocate, who had not yet spoken, looked grave and uneasy.

The Lieutenant took up the musket.

"This weapon has been discharged," he

said, as he passed it to the Judge for inspection.

He then drew the pistols from the holsters, and examined the priming of both.

"Neither of these pistols has been used," he said, as he passed them on. "Both are loaded."

No second shot, therefore, had been fired.

The Countess clasped her hands, and uttered an exclamation of thankfulness.

"Nay, Madame," whispered the Lieutenant kindly, "we must not begin to hope too soon. This one ambiguous circumstance will not alone be sufficient to clear our friend. We must have patience and fortitude."

The Prosecutor for the Crown then rose, and summed up the evidence. The substance of his speech was this:—"That the body of George, Baron de Pradines, had been discovered by three servants of the Countess de Peyrelade, lying dead in the valley known as the Val du Rocher Rouge,

on the evening of All Saints' Day. It was known that M. de Fontane had had some misunderstanding with the deceased, and had received from him letters of a threatening nature. M. de Fontane had been out all day at Murat, and in returning thence must pass through that valley. Monsieur de Fontane left Murat at six o'clock, and did not reach the Château de Peyrelade till between nine and ten. The journey need not occupy longer than two hours. What had the Chevalier done with the surplus time? He arrives at the Château in an excited state, with his clothes blood-stained, and his horse trembling as if from terror and hard riding. His voice is wild, and he says he has killed 'a wolf.' When the body is brought to the Château and he is interrogated by M. le Lieutenant, he betrays manifest confusion and alarm. Even the grooms and herdsmen attach suspicion to him; and, as if to cherish the lingering rancour which he entertained against M.

de Pradines, both the letters sent to him by that gentleman are found preserved in his writing-case. Madame la Comtesse affirms that she heard *two* shots fired on the night of the murder, and only *one* of M. de Fontane's weapons has been discharged. He felt bound to say that this circumstance tended to the advantage of the prisoner; but, at the same time, everyone knew that, to a lady in the naturally anxious state of mind of Madame de Peyrelade, every sight and sound becomes magnified. What more likely than that the second shot should be a mere trick of the distempered imagination? The examination of the weapons proved that one shot only could have been fired. Out of four pistols and two muskets—six firearms in all—one only had been discharged; and that was the musket of M. de Fontane. He believed that nothing farther could be said on the subject."

The Judge then asked the prisoner if he had anything to reply.

M. de Fontane rose, pale and self-possessed. He bowed to the Judge, to the Procureur du Roi, and to the Lieutenant of Police.

"My Lord," he said calmly, "I have little to urge in my defence, except to assever my innocence. I left Murat at six, and set off briskly for the Château de Peyrelade. Before half-an-hour had elapsed, the evening became quite dark. Much snow had already fallen, and by the time I entered upon the road across the mountains, the way was not only dark, but slippery for my horse. I dismounted, and led him up the first steep ascent. I thus lost considerable time. When I came down at the opposite side and arrived at the open space whence five different ways branch off in five different directions, I found myself altogether at fault. I had not travelled this country for many years—the snow had changed the general features of the place, and it was just then quite dark. I thought it best to leave all to

the sagacity of the horse, and, re-mounting, dropped the reins upon his neck, and let him choose his way. He was as much perplexed as myself. Twice he turned towards the road on our left; then, after a momentary pause, chose a road straight before us. So we went on. The farther we went, however, the more I became convinced that the horse had taken a wrong direction. At last I found that we were entering a thick wood, and as I knew there should be nothing of the kind on the way to the Château, I turned the horse's head, and began to retrace our steps. Scarcely had I proceeded a dozen yards on the way back, when I heard a distant howl. The horse stopped instinctively, and we both listened. Again that sound, and nearer! I needed no spur to urge my steed on his flight—that ominous cry was enough. Away he started with me, as if we had not gone a mile that day! It was of little use; for the wolf gained on us, and at last I

descried him about a quarter of a mile behind, coming with savage speed along the snow. I now saw that there was nothing for it but a mortal combat with the brute. So I alighted quietly, and waited for him, a clasp-knife open and ready in my belt, and my gun on the cock. I did not tie the horse to a tree, for I thought if the wolf conquered, the poor animal might at least have the chance of escape. The beast was up in less time too than I take to tell it. When within a couple of yards, he stopped, seeing me prepared to receive him. His eyes were red and bright as coals—his sides gaunt—his tongue lolling from his mouth. His hot breath smoked in the frosty air. So we stood for a second or two, face to face—the wolf and I. Then he gave a low howl, and as he sprang towards me, I fired! I hit him—lamed one of his fore-legs; but that only made him more furious, for he was on me again directly, like a tiger! I tried in vain to beat him off with my gun, but he

was too strong for me; so I threw it down, got my knife from my belt, and held it between my teeth. As I did so, he snapped at my hand and nearly tore my fingers off. Then I threw my arms round the brute, and fell upon him. It was my last resource—he was under, and if I could only keep him there, and strangle him, or cut his throat, I was safe. It was a frightful moment. My head swam—my breath failed—then I gathered up all my remaining strength, and plunged the knife in his throat! He moaned, his head fell back—the struggle was over—he was dead! I then mounted my horse, who had never once offered to leave me, though he stood trembling all over with terror. I cheered him on—I shouted—I laughed—I sang! I rode like a madman at full speed, and when I reached the Château I had not yet recovered from the excitement of the contest. I came out of a death-fight to a brilliant company—from a wolf to a bride; and I was just about

to relate my adventure—when—when, my Lord, the corpse of the Baron de Pradines was brought into the room, and I heard myself accused of being his murderer! I have no more to say. I have stated the whole truth. I lost my way, and almost my life. I am innocent, and God will judge me rightly, however my fellow-men may decide against me."

The young man sat down, flushed with the relation of his combat, and confident in the justice of his cause.

A loud murmur of sympathy and satisfaction ran through the Court, and the prisoner was rewarded for all his sufferings by one glad and loving glance from Marguerite de Peyrelade. Her mind was now relieved of every doubt; and, indeed, with the exception of the lawyers, there was not a soul in the hall who doubted his innocence.

When the murmur had subsided, more witnesses were called.

Antoine Guinot and Elie Blainval,

two *gendarmes*, next gave evidence.

Lieut. of Police. "Antoine Guinot—you went by my orders to inspect the roads among the mountains."

A. Guinot. "Yes, M. le Lieutenant."

Lieut. "Did you there discover the body of a dead wolf, or any signs of blood on the snow?"

A. Guinot. "No, M. le Lieutenant."

Lieut. "Did you thoroughly search the Val du Rocher Rouge?"

A. Guinot. "Yes, Monsieur. There was no dead wolf to be seen in any part. Snow had been falling for two days and nights before we got there, so there would have been nothing but the carcase of the beast to guide us; but there was no such carcase anywhere about."

Elie Blainval was next examined. Went with the last witness. Saw no carcase. Snow was deep on the ground, and of course no stains or other marks could be distinguished. Would swear there was no dead wolf anywhere on the moun-

tain roads. Corroborated the statement of his companion in every particular.

On this the Prosecutor for the Crown again addressed the Court, but very briefly. The jury, he said, had heard the statements of the last witnesses. M. the Lieutenant of Police had despatched them on the day following the murder, as soon as they arrived from St. Flour, in order that the prisoner's statement might be thoroughly investigated. No carcase of any description had been found. It was not his (the Prosecutor's) desire to prejudice his hearers against the prisoner; but he felt it his duty to remind them that his defence was unsupported by any kind of proof. They had before them a strong case of circumstantial evidence on the one side, and on the other the bare assertion of a man whose only chance for life depended on the plausibility of his defence and the credulity of his auditors. He begged now to leave the matter in the hands of the Jury.

After an address from the judge, in which he summed up the evidence in a very similar manner to the Prosecutor for the Crown, and in which he exhorted them to lay any doubts which they might entertain to the side of mercy, the jury retired.

Then the chorus of laughter and loud talking, so long hushed, broke forth again. By this time night had come on, and the patch of daylight seen through the *œil-de-bœuf* had long since disappeared. The young men made bets with each other on the verdict. All the ladies took the part of the prisoner; and, to do them justice, most of the gentlemen likewise. The peasants pulled out lumps of brown bread and country cheese, and began to eat.

Time went on. Two hours passed away without the return of the jury. Then another hour. Ten o'clock struck by the great clock over the entrance, and the audience grew silent and weary. Still the twelve

came not. The judge nodded on the bench. Madame de Peyrelade sat, statue-like, in the same spot. The Chevalier de Fontane paced the dock in an agony of suspense.

Then eleven struck; and ere the last stroke had died away, the jury returned and took their places.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said his lordship, waking up, "are you all agreed?"

"Yes, my Lord," said the foreman slowly and distinctly.

The silence was intense throughout the court. Every breath was held; every eye turned towards him.

"Do you find the prisoner guilty, or not guilty?'

"*Guilty.*"

A loud murmur broke from all parts of the hall. The prisoner—a shade paler than before—folded his arms across his breast, and looked calmly round him. The Countess de Peyrelade was carried fainting from the court.

a parchment roll in the other, and reads aloud the dreadful formula :—

"He whom we have brought hither is Eugène Fontane, formerly called Chevalier de Fontane, and ex-Captain of Hussars in the military service of His Majesty the King of Prussia. The said Eugène de Fontane is brought hither to suffer death, being condemned thereto by the criminal court of this town. He will now be broken on the wheel, being charged and convicted of the crime of homicide on the person of the very noble, puissant, and excellent Seigneur George, Baron de Pradines, and, during life, Captain of the Auvergne Light Dragoons. Pray to God for the repose of their souls !"

Eugène is pale, but resigned. He has not long since taken leave of Marguerite, and, despite the agony of that parting, he is comforted, for she believes him innocent. His step is firm, his head erect, his eye

bright and fearless. His right hand is hidden in the breast of his coat, closely pressed against his heart. It holds a lock of her hair.

Now the bishop addresses to him the last words which a prisoner hears on earth.

"Eugène de Fontane," he says, solemnly, "if you will speak the truth and declare yourself guilty of the crime for which you are condemned, I am here, in the name of God, to give you absolution; and when you are stretched upon the wheel the executioner will give you the *coup de grace,* in order to spare you the sufferings which you would otherwise endure. Reflect, for the sake of both body and soul. Do you yet persist in saying that you are innocent?"

The young man cast a glance of horror at the hideous apparatus. His lip quivered, and for a moment his resolution seemed to fail. Then he fell upon his knees and prayed silently.

When he rose, he was calm and stedfast as before.

"Let the executioner do his office," he said, firmly. "I will not die with a lie upon my tongue. I *am* innocent, and Heaven knows it."

The Chevalier then draws a ring from his finger and gives it to the executioner, in token of pardon. And now he takes off his coat and waistcoat and holds out his arms to be bound; and now, suddenly, a cry is heard on the outskirts of the crowd—a shrill, piercing, despairing cry.

"Stop! stop! let me pass! I am the murderer!—he is innocent! I am the murderer of the Baron de Pradines!"

And a mounted man, pale, breathless, disordered, is seen pressing wildly through the crowd. He gains the foot of the scaffold—he rushes eagerly up the steps—falls fainting at the feet of the condemned!

It is the priest—it is André Bernard.

* * * *

Once again the Justice Hall is thronged.

Once again we see the former crowd: the same faces; the same peasants; the same lawyers; the same mass of spectators, noble and plebeian; the same judge; the same jury.

Yet there is one great and material difference: there is not the same prisoner. André Bernard is in the dock, and the Chevalier de Fontane is nowhere present.

Madame de Peyrelade and her servants are also absent. Otherwise the Court-house looks as it did a week since, when an innocent man was there condemned to die.

"Prisoner," says the Judge, "the Court is prepared to listen to your confession."

The Abbé rose. A profound silence reigned throughout the hall. In a voice broken with emotion, he began as follows:—

"About three months since, I was visited by the Baron de Pradines in my parsonage at St. Saturnin. He had not

been on good terms with his sister, Madame de Peyrelade, for some years, and he now desired a reconciliation. He was a man of violent temper and dissolute habits; but he professed repentance for his former courses, and ardently entreated my intercession with Madame. I believed him, and became the bearer of his penitent messages. Owing to my representations, the lady believed him also, and he was received into the Château. A fortnight had scarcely elapsed, when M. de Fontane arrived at the Château; and on a due consideration of—of all the previous events" (here the prisoner's voice faltered), "I absolved Madame from a rash vow which she had too hastily contracted. Now M. de Pradines had hoped to inherit the estates and fortune of his sister; he was therefore much enraged on finding that the said vow was made null and void. He departed at once to join his regiment, and in the course of a few days I received from him an abusive letter. Of this I took

me; for after night-fall at this season, the wolves are savage, and often come down from the heights. I had not gone far when I heard a horse coming along at full speed behind me. I drew on one side to let the rider pass. The moon just then shone out, and I recognised the Baron de Pradines. He knew me also; and though he had been galloping before, he now reigned up his horse and stood quite still.

"'Good evening, most reverend Abbé,' said he in a mocking voice. 'Will you favour me with a piece of godly information; for I am but a poor sinner, and need enlightening. Pray how much have you been paid by M. le Chevalier for patching up this marriage?'

"I felt my blood boil and my cheeks burn at this insult, but I affected to treat it as a jest.

"'You are facetious, Monsier le Baron,' I replied.

"'Not at all,' he said, with a bitter

laugh. 'Gentlemen in your profession, M. le Curé, have their prices for everything; from the absolution for a vow to the absolution for a murder.'

"'Monsieur,' I replied, 'your expressions exceed the limits of pleasantry.'

"'Not at all, Monsieur le Curé,' he repeated again, 'not at all. And, withal, you are a very noble, and meek, and self-sacrificing gentleman, M. le Curé. *You love my sister*, most holy sir; and yet you sell the absolution which enables her to marry another. It is really difficult to tell, M. le Curé, which of your admirable qualities predominates—your Avarice, or your Love. Both, at least, are equally respectable in a priest who is vowed to poverty and celibacy.'

"'*And peace*, M. le Baron,' I added. 'You are aware, Monsieur, that my profession forbids me to chastise you as you deserve, and therefore you insult me. Pass on, and interfere with me no more.'

"'Indeed I shall not pass on, M. le

Curé,' he continued, 'I must stay and compliment you as you deserve. It is a pity, is it not, M. le Curé, that your vows prevent you from marrying my sister yourself?'

'"If you will not pass me, M. le Baron,' I said, for I was trembling with suppressed rage, 'I must pass you, for I will bear this no longer.'

"The passage was narrow, and he intentionally barred the way. I seized his horse's reins and turned his head, when—my lord—the Baron raised his whip and struck me on the face! My fowling-piece was in my hand—I was mad—I was furious. I know not to this moment how it was done, but I fired—fired *both* barrels of my gun, and the next moment—*Oh, mon Dieu!*—he was lying at my feet dead and bleeding—I was a murderer!"

The priest paused in his narrative, and hid his face in his hands. A murmur ran through the court. After a few

moments, however, he raised his head, and continued:—

"I saw him but for an instant, and then turned and fled. I cannot remember where I went, or what I did in that terrible interval; but at last I found myself before the gates of the Château de Peyrelade. A dreadful terror possessed me—I feared the night, and the woods, and the mountains, and the pale moonlight. I thought to find refuge in the crowd of human beings—refuge from that terrible thought—refuge from that hideous sight. But it pursued me! They brought him in, ghastly and blood-stained, wrapt in the cloak in which he lay upon the grass; and on his pale forehead was the mark of my—of my . . . . That night I was mad. I remember nothing—neither how I got home—nor how I left the Château—nor when I entered my own door. For days I walked and lived in a dream of horror. Then I heard of the trial and condemnation of an innocent

man. I mounted my horse—I flew—I feared that I should be too late; but I had resolved to kill myself on the scaffold if he was already dead! I was in time, thank God! and now I am ready to take his place. This is my confession, and, before Heaven, I declare it full and true. I entreat all here present to pray for me."

When the agitation that followed this confession had somewhat subsided, and the jury had conferred for a moment in their places, the foreman pronounced the prisoner guilty, but recommended him to mercy. Then the judge, in a speech interrupted more than once by emotion, passed sentence of death; but concluded by an intimation that the case should be reported to the King as one deserving his royal clemency.

The Royal Pardon, thus solicited, followed as a matter of course, and in less than a week André Bernard was free. The Chevalier de Fontane himself brought the precious parchment from Versailles,

and fetched a carriage to convey the priest from prison.

"Come back to us, dear friend," he said. "Come back to your chapel and your flock. Forget the past, and resume the useful life in which you used to find your greatest happiness."

But the priest shook his head.

"I cannot," he said. "The King has pardoned me, but I have yet to earn the pardon of Heaven. I go hence to La Trappe, there to pass the remainder of my days in prayer and penance. Hush!—to remonstrate is useless. I deserve a far heavier punishment. I have more sins than one upon my soul. God sees my heart, and He knows all my guilt. I must go—far, far away. I shall pray for your happiness—and hers. Heaven bless you, and have mercy on me! Farewell."

THE END.

London: Printed by A. Schulze, 13, Poland Street.

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